Table of Contents

1. prologue
2. chapter 1: river of blood
3. chapter 2: no remorse
4. chapter 3: sunningrocks battle
5. chapter 4: the gathering
6. chapter 5: only for a minute
7. chapter 6: beauty
8. chapter 7: all of you
9. chapter 8: attention
10. chapter 9: turning page
11. chapter 10: feverish
12. chapter 11: a raven
13. chapter 12: once upon a wish
14. chapter 13: apple doesn't fall far
15. chapter 14: our bloody love
16. epilogue

prologue

THEY TURNED AWAY *from the harsh wind and sped through the grass toward Fourtrees. As he raced toward the clearing in the middle of the four great oaks where he had seen those fox-hearts. Seedpelt wondered grimly why Oakstar let them live in the first place.*

The sun was high in the sky, and the clearing was crisscrossed with shafts of cold sunlight. He dug his paws into the soft ground and pushed on ahead of Deerdapple and Thrushtalon, his chest tightening with fear as he tore along the trail that led to the secret den that Mapleshade and Redriver always snuck inside of. Without hesitating, he ducked his head and raced through the lichen and vines.

"Mapleshade!" he yowled as she exploded into the den.

It was completely empty. Silence. No cat stirred, and the scent of cats was stale.

chapter 1: river of blood

MAPLESHADE TURNED TAIL and fled at the scene. She had thought about it for many moons and had decided that she could never allow herself to fall for a cat-like Appledusk. The handsome light brown tom was not worth risking everything for, and she was more convinced when she saw him aimlessly flirting with that reddish-brown tabby she-cat, Reedshine, from across the river at Sunningrocks.

He hadn't noticed Mapleshade watching from the treeline. She had come to tell him that they were done and that they should be with cats from their own Clans, but she didn't have to say it, he was already moving on without even telling her! She was angry. Not because he was with another she-cat and she was jealous, but because if she were still in love with him, he would have manipulated her while being mates with another cat.

The tortoiseshell was glad that she no longer had to risk everything to meet with Appledusk. He was a mouse-brain and a fox-heart!

She finally reached the camp where cats were bustling around the clearing. The deputy, a dark brown striped tabby tom named Beetail, was organising patrols when he spotted Mapleshade across the clearing.

"Hey, Mapleshade," he greeted with a purr. "Can you patrol by Twolegplace alone today? I would send you with more warriors but I sent most out to other borders and Deerdapple is training Nettlepaw today."

The tortoiseshell, her anger for Appledusk subsiding, nodded and turned her tail to leave the camp.

It didn't take long for Mapleshade to reach the Twolegplace border.

She padded through the treeline, rubbing herself against every tree and plant to mark her territory. The breeze was gentle against her medium-length fur and the dirt was soft and damp under her paws. That's what you get when its Greenleaf.

Everything was peaceful until she heard a shriek of pain ahead. Her fur stood on end as she widely stared around. Her amber eyes landed on two cats up ahead. There was a massive tom, the biggest cat she's ever seen, with tiger-like fur and sharp baring teeth. He stood above a smaller brown cat with wide green eyes and a gaping mouth gurgling blood. Her fur bristled in horror when she realised that the tiger-furred tom had torn out the kittypet's throat, tearing off its green collar in the process.

Blood dripped down from the massive tom's jaws as he smirked down at the dying body. Mapleshade took a hesitant step back, which a twig snap in two. She grimaced at the noise and pinned her ears against her head in fear when she saw the tom snap his head in her direction. His eyes were like fire, full of malice and bloodlust as he scanned her smaller form.

He let out a low hiss and growl, approaching the ThunderClan warrior with unsheathed silver claws that glinted in the sunlight.

Mapleshade couldn't move. She was much too afraid to. The tom's aura screamed violence, horror and danger. He seemed so powerful as his muscles rippled under his strange, battle-scarred fur. His shoulders and head were broad, he had long legs and a sweeping tail that would drag behind him if he wasn't lifting it above the ground.

When he was nose-to-nose in front of her, she couldn't help but breathe in his scent. He smelt like coppery blood, the forest and smoke from a fire. It was an unexpected nice smell, she thought he'd smell like crow-food and death.

"And who are you?" he growled, his voice smooth yet had a rough edge to it. She shivered when his whiskers brushed against her cheek as he circled her. His pawsteps were so light, which was surprising. They were large and she thought that a rabbit could hear him from a mile away if he stomped.

"M-My name is... is Mapleshade," she choked out, looking at the dead body of the kittypet a few paces ahead. The body seemed so small and pitiful from where she stood. The tom tensed and let out a growl.

"Clan cat," he muttered and Mapleshade looked up. She could see him much more closely now. He had a deep scar across his muzzle, a thin scar across his eye and another one over his mouth. One of his ears seemed to be torn away, leaving only some poking up skin left. There was a healed gash across his throat, many other scars across his flank and a long one across his shoulders.

She couldn't help but speak. "Why did you kill that kittypet?" Mapleshade shut her mouth. *You mouse-brain!*

The tom's whiskers twitched, but she didn't know if it was annoyance or amusement. "Would you ask a badger why it kills a cat?" he asked and Mapleshade tensed. "No."

The tiger-furred tom circled her again before sitting in front of her, licking the blood away from his white chest. "I'm Redriver," he said between licks. "What are you doing here, Clan cat?"

"I'm patrolling the border," Mapleshade replied, her voice less shaky. "Why is your name Redriver? It sounds like a Clan name."

Redriver paused, his eyes darkened with what seemed disgust, anger and sorrow all in one. "It means a river stained with the blood of my enemies. My mother named me."

He bristled then. "As for it sounding like a Clan name—" he sunk his claws into the earth –"my grandfather was Ripplestar of ShadowClan and my grandmother was a RiverClan medicine cat, Kinktail. That's how I know how to fight and kill like one of your warriors. I also learned all the healing herbs from my mother, who learned it all from my grandmother."

Mapleshade was in shock. This murderer had Clan blood? Then why wasn't he in a Clan himself? Deciding not to ask – not wanting to push the killer tom – she then said, "I'm a ThunderClan warrior."

Redriver's ear twitched and he looked past Mapleshade. He spun around then and padded over to the dead kittypet, picking him up by the scruff. He dragged the body over to the fence and with one spring, he jumped swiftly over the fence with ease.

Mapleshade then heard a rustle and looked behind her. She saw Nettlepaw, the ginger tom with green eyes, holding a mouse in his jaws. "Hi, Mapleshade!" he squeaked. "What are you doing?"

Mapleshade pushed the thoughts of Redriver away, looking the other direction from the patch of drying blood ahead. "Patrolling. Where's Deerdapple?"

"I'm having my assessment today," he mewed and Mapleshade's eyes widened. "Then what're you talking to me for? Go on, you're meant to be concentrating, not dawdling!"

Nettlepaw raced away back into the forest and Mapleshade turned around and gasped. On top of the fence was Redriver, staring at her with fire in his amber gaze.

She turned around and disappeared into the forest without looking back.

chapter 2: no remorse

THE NEXT MOON, Mapleshade hadn't seen that tom again. She hadn't even patrolled the Twolegplace border since that day, either, trying to avoid it at all costs. Instead, Beetail sent her to patrol the ShadowClan and RiverClan borders. But now, the deputy decided to make her patrol Twolegplace today with Frecklewish and Bloomheart.

She waited at the entrance of the camp until the spotted golden she-cat and the grey tabby tom had exited the warrior's den and approached her.

"Morning, Mapleshade," Frecklewish purred. Mapleshade nodded lightly to the daughter of Oakstar and turned to her former mentor, Bloomheart. "Ready?"

The tom nodded and led the way out of camp towards the pine forest where the Twolegplace would be just outside of. It had been peaceful. The patch of blood from the kittypet must have disappeared in the rain and there was no scent or sign of Redriver anywhere. She assumed he must have moved on as most rogues do. But StarClan was she wrong...

The peace was cut in half when they heard a wail of pain up ahead around the corner near Sunningrocks. Bloomheart glanced at Frecklewish before racing ahead, the golden she-cat on his paws. Mapleshade hesitated, her heart sinking in her chest as Bloomheart and Frecklewish most likely raced to their doom.

Mapleshade leaped after them and when she turned the corner, she gasped in horror. Bloomheart and Frecklewish stood not far away from her, also staring at the gory sight.

Redriver was there, his sides heaving as he stood above three bodies of ragged, feral looking cats that smelt like crow-food and human

waste. His claws and jaws were covered in thick, dripping blood and there was a painful-looking deep gash in his side. Bloomheart's fur bristled and Frecklewish stood on her hackles and hissed quietly.

Redriver snapped his gaze toward the patrol and snarled at them, making Mapleshade flinched back. She knew what this tom was capable of, and she felt intense fear for her Clanmate's safety. Redriver studied the crowd and stopped at the sight of Mapleshade, and he let out a low growl which sent shivers down her spine to the tip of her tail.

Full of courage, Frecklewish leaped with a snarl, but before she could get her claws in his fur, Redriver moved to the side and dodged her attack. With her dazed on the ground, he swiftly slashed her shoulder, blood splattering on the fence beside them. Frecklewish let out a screech of pain and rolled back, blood pouring down her shoulder and making a small pool on the grass.

Bloomheart attempts to race toward Frecklewish but was stopped and Redriver leapt and pinned him down by the throat with his front paws. Mapleshade opened her mouth to stop the tiger-furred tom but it was too late. With a mighty swipe, blood gushed out of Bloomheart's throat like waves and soaked his grey fur and Redriver's black paws.

Mapleshade, horrified, looks at Frecklewish, who was staring with pain and fear in her amber gaze. The golden spotted she-cat gets up and leaps away silently back into the forest before Redriver could turn around and stop her. Mapleshade stood there, her paws frozen to the ground.

The tom's orange eyes looked up, and he stared into Mapleshade's soft amber ones. "You shouldn't have come here," he muttered, standing straight and padding away from Bloomheart's cold corpse. He stopped beside her, their neck-fur brushing and his hot breath on her shoulder, making her shiver.

Sensing her fear, he purred. "You should know by now to stay away from me," he huskily meowed. Mapleshade closed her eyes, preparing for a killing bite or a swipe of his dangerous claws, but

was puzzled to feel nothing. When she opened her eyes, Redriver was gone and only a blood trail that leads over the fence told her he left that way.

Snapping her head toward the body of her former mentor, she whimpered and crawled over to him, burying her nose into his cold grey fur.

Whimpering, she closed her eyes tightly and cried into his fur, breathing in his forest and wind scent. There were rushed pawsteps and Mapleshade scented more ThunderClan cats.

A cat leaned down beside her, and when she looked up she saw Seedpelt, a light-brown and white tom with green eyes, comfortingly licking her shoulder. She looked around and noticed that the medicine cat, Ravenwing was there, shaking his head solemnly.

"He's dead," he black tom said. "But he wasn't in pain. A wound like this would have been a quick death, not even a second of pain."

Oakstar hung his head and both Beetail and Deerdapple sniffled in sadness.

"We need to take him back to camp," Mapleshade croaked. "We need to prepare for the vigil and share tongues with him one last time."

Oakstar looked at the other three bodies and wrinkled his nose. "Who are these cats?"

Mapleshade shrugged, "I don't know. When we found the tom, he was standing over their bodies. They must have been rogues that attacked him since he had a wound."

"Where is he now?" Beetail asked, anger in his tone. His eyes shone with hate for Bloomheart's murderer.

Mapleshade shook her head, "He left over the fence. He would be long gone by now."

Satisfied with her answer, Beetail – with the help of Oakstar and

Deerdapple – lifted Bloomheart's body and padded away into the forest. Mapleshade turned back toward the fence, expecting to see Redriver sitting atop it like last time, but saw nothing.

Mapleshade turned tail and followed her Clanmates back to camp.

chapter 3: sunningrocks battle

MAPLESHADE YOWLED ANGRILY and slashed Splashfoot, a RiverClan tom with pale grey fur across the face. He howled in pain and swiped a paw of her, but missed and stumbled forward, blood dripping into his vision. Mapleshade leapt and bit down on his back paw, and with a screech, he jumped back before leaping forward.

Mapleshade dodged, rolling to the side before immediately leaping on top of the dazed down and pushing down with unsheathed claws. He struggled to get out of her grasp and with a nip to his ear, she let him go, and he raced away toward the river with a wail.

The battle raged on around her. She saw Birchface battling the RiverClan deputy, Spiketail, and his apprentice, Flowerpaw, fighting off Volepaw, a brown tom. Beetail was pinning down Eeltail, grey-and-black tabby she-cat, and Frecklewish slashing at Milkfur, a white she-cat. Mapleshade continued scanning the battle and her eyes widened when she saw her former mate, Appledusk, leaping toward Birchface with a snarl.

But before she could see anything further, she was knocked away and pinned down on her back. She looked up to see a familiar reddish-brown tabby she-cat, glaring down at her with fierce amber eyes.

"You!" Reedshine hissed angrily. "It's all your fault!"

Mapleshade kicked her away with her back legs and the she-cat jumped back with a pained hiss. "What are you talking about?" Mapleshade growled and Reedshine bristled.

"Appledusk!" Reedshine snarled. "That's what. He's rejected our kits because of you!" She leapt at Mapleshade and slashed at her ears.

"He doesn't want my precious kits that we made together because he loves you."

Mapleshade was shocked. They had kits? Why was Reedshine here in battle instead of the nursery with her precious bundles?

"Reedshine," Mapleshade began. "I once thought I loved Appledusk, and that I would do anything to keep us together. But things have changed. I realised I didn't love him and that what I was doing was going to build conflict and destroy our lives. I also realised that he wasn't a good mate and that the whole time he was with me he had also been with you."
As she spoke, Reedshine's eyes softened and changed from anger to pain, anger and confliction.

"I realised that when I went to Sunningrocks to tell him I didn't want to be his mate anymore, I wanted to get out of that relationship before I made the mistake of having his kits. But I saw him with you, and I already knew the answer."

Reedshine had relaxed her muscles by now, and as Mapleshade felt her retreat from her pinned form, Reedshine let out a pained screech.

With wide eyes, she watched as Reedshine was forcefully dragged away from her and torn apart by sharp silver claws and long sharp fangs. Reddish-brown fur, blood, flesh and even bone flung in all directions as a familiar-looking tom ravaged her body. Mapleshade whimpered, her eyes like saucers as some of Reedshine's flesh splattered on her cheek and fell down at her paws.

She looked down and realised it wasn't a chunk of flesh but Reedshine's tail! The cat that she feared the most had torn apart Reedshine so gruesomely, that her limbs were scattered around the battlefield. Mapleshade looked around to see that all the ThunderClan and RiverClan cats were running down the river, looking at something in the water.

Suddenly, there was a small pinch in her scruff and she squealed in fear and surprise when she was roughly dragged away by Redriver. As she was, she saw the bloodied, torn apart body of Reedshine

getting smaller and smaller until the trees and undergrowth blocked her view.

Mapleshade didn't know how long Redriver had been dragging her for, but she gasped when he let go and she flopped to the ground like a terrified piece of fresh kill. She looked around and noticed she was right near Fourtrees in WindClan territory.

"W-What?" she gasped, still in shock at what had happened at Sunningrocks.

She looked up at the tiger-furred tom, who was covered in blood and small chunks of flesh and bone. He merely grunted and padded over to a small stream and stepped into it, the water reaching halfway up his legs. Mapleshade watched as he washed away the blood and gore, dunking his head under the cool water and shaking his head. A cloud of blood was washed away from his fur and she stared at it until it disappeared.

There was a splash and she snapped her head back at the killer tom. He had a carp fish in his jaws and was padding over to her with dripping wet fur. He dropped the fish at her paws and shook out the water from his fur.

"Eat," he ordered, licking his spiky, wet fur down. Mapleshade flinched and leaned down, biting into the fish and gulping down the distasteful prey. She preferred land prey, but this will do. There was no arguing with a murderer... unless you wanted to be killed.

When she had enough, she leaned back up and Redriver had finished smoothing down his already half-dry fur. He leaned down and gulped down the rest of the fish with quick bites.

He licked his lips and stretched, rump in the air. He sighed and began padding toward Fourtrees. "Follow me," he meowed and Mapleshade stood on her paws and immediately followed.

When they leapt down into the hollow of Fourtrees, he led her to a hollow den under one of the trees, hidden by a wall of lichen, rocks and vines. She followed him hesitantly inside and blinked at what was inside. There was comfortable looking bedding of wool,

feathers, moss and grass. On the left wall were hollowed-out shelves where he stored healing herbs. There was a small pile of fresh kill in the corner and beautiful looking shells, feathers, rocks and Twoleg things in the other corner.

"This is your den?" Mapleshade asked, shocked. "You've been in Fourtrees this whole time?"

Redriver nodded. "My grandmother was a clever cat. She never would leave the Clans completely. She wanted to keep an eye on them, even after being exiled for having my mother and aunt. So when the Clan Gatherings occurred, she would hide and listen to them from inside this den she hollowed out. She would hide her kits in the other hollowed-out space here."

He pointed his tail to another wall of lichen on the right wall. Mapleshade poked her head through to see a large space where a faint scent of other cats still lingered, but no one was there.

"My grandmother died moons ago before I was born," Redriver informed, rolling his eyes. "My mother, however, died a few moons ago due to Greencough, and my aunt not long after."

Mapleshade frowned, "Don't you have any littermates?"

"Two," he replied, his eyes darkening. "Stormsky and Blueheart. The cowards left to become lazy kittypets in Twolegplace."

Mapleshade felt a wave of horror go over her. "So... that kittypet you killed...?"

"No," Redriver shook his head. "He wasn't my brother. Stormsky is a grey tabby tom with blue eyes, not a brown tom with green eyes. My sister is pale grey with blue eyes. I look nothing like them. My mother said I always looked more like my father."

The ThunderClan warrior shifted her paws. "Why're you telling me this?"

Redriver didn't answer and laid down in his nest. Mapleshade felt awkward standing there. Eventually, the tom growled and beckoned her over to lay beside him. The she-cat laid down and leaned into

his medium-length fur which was dry and clean now from the stream.

There was a thick silence and Mapleshade thought of her Clanmates, and how they were running downriver, looking concerned and afraid at something in the water.

She looked at Redriver, who was staring at her, curiosity in his gaze.

"Do... do you know what was happening in the river during the battle?" she asked, hopeful to know if he knew anything. "I couldn't see anything."

Redriver flicked his ear. "That light-brown tom that the she-cat who was attacking you fawned over had struck your Clanmate so hard that he lost his footing and slipped from the very top of the rocks. He landed in the river. A smaller she-cat leapt after him and struggled to keep the tom's head out of the water but the current was too strong and they were both submerged. As I was dragging you along, you would have noticed their bodies washed up on shore if you weren't in shock."

After his explanation, Mapleshade was shocked. "What did the two cats that drowned look like?"

"A dark tabby with amber eyes and a dappled grey with green eyes," he replied and Mapleshade choked. "Birchface and Flowerpaw are dead?"

"Were you close?"

Mapleshade shook her head, "No. I'm not close with anyone in our Clan, really. Bloomheart was my mentor, the grey tabby cat you killed."

She saw now guilt or remorse in his amber orbs, but for some reason, she didn't feel anger. She felt nothing.

Redriver stretched his paws and yawned, "I don't regret what I did to any cats. I do what I need to do to survive. I kill who I want, talk to who I want and go where I want."

Mapleshade was silent before she asked: "Are you going to kill me?"

Redriver looked at her, something unrecognisable in his gaze.

"No."

chapter 4: the gathering

"**STEADY ON MAPLESHADE!** You just trod on my tail!" The WindClan warrior jerked away with a hiss.

"Sorry, Swiftflight," Mapleshade apologized over her shoulder as she plunged deeper int the throng of cats. The light of the full moon turned all their pelts to silver, and fur tickled Mapleshade's nose. Above her, Oakstar's voice echoed around the trunks of four gigantic oak trees.

"My warriors tracked the adders to their nest at Snakerocks and blocked the hole with stones," the ThunderClan leader reported. "Thanks to their courage, no adders have been since been seen on our territory."

"They were lucky not to get bitten," grunted a ShadowClan elder near Mapleshade's ear.

"Too, right," agreed her Clanmate. "Remember when Marshpaw trod on an adder on his first patrol? That was a bad way to die."

The first cat shrugged. "I've seen worse."

Mapleshade rolled her eyes. *Trust ShadowClan cats to get competitive about deaths they've watched.* She dodged around a rock and emerged among a cluster of RiverClan cats. Instantly pelts bristled and she felt eyes burn into her.

"There may be a truce," snarled a black warrior, Rainfall. "But don't push your luck, ThunderClan mouse-dung."

Mapleshade ducked her head. "I mean no harm," she mewed. "I'm not staying."

"Good," growled a cat she couldn't see.

Mapleshade forced her hair to lie flat as she wove among the hostile warriors. She couldn't blame RiverClan for being angry. ThunderClan had triumphed in the last clash over Sunningrocks; defeat was the bitterest wound of all.

"Remember what happened to Birchface and Flowerpaw," Rainfall murmured into her ear, so close that Mapleshade could feel the heat of his fish breath. "Those rocks belong to us, and we'll kill as many of your Clanmates as we need until you give them up."

Mapleshade stumbled as she remembered how Redriver told her how Appledusk, her former mate, had struck Birthface, causing Oakstar's son to fall into the rushing river. Flowerpaw dived after him, trying to save her mentor, but the two washed up on ThunderClan shore, dead. It was as if they were making a last desperate effort to go home.

Mapleshade swallowed a burst of rage at the warriors around her. Why did RiverClan insist on fighting over a bunch of rocks that were clearly on ThunderClan's territory? She lowered her head and pushed her way through the knot of hostile cats, trying to get to the large oak where Redriver's den would be, where he would be. She made it to the edge of the hollow were the shadows clustered more densely, securing the secret den. But before she could enter the den, a pale brown shape loomed in front of her, and Mapleshade's nostrils flared with the scent of fish. She looked up, her heart racing with anxiousness.

"What are you doing here?" Appledusk hissed. His long front claws caught the moonlight as he sank them into the grass.

Hissing, she spat back at him. "Am I not allowed to be at a Gathering?"

Appledusk took a step closer, his green eyes narrowed. "What happened to Reedshine?" his eyes held pain. "When we found her..." his voice trailed off in a shaky breath. "Last we saw her, she was fighting you. You were nowhere to be found when we found her dead."

Mapleshade could tell talking about it pained him, and guilt

swallowed her heart like a tidal wave. But she couldn't betray Redriver.

"I don't know," she meowed. "She had beaten me in the battle. I ran back to camp. Last I saw her, she was alive."

Disbelief shone in his green eyes. "You're lying." He padded around her. "You definitely would have been jealous when you found out about me and Reedshine. Especially when you found out about Willowkit, Reedkit and Shykit."

He said each of their names with passion as if it would strike her like a snake bite. But she felt nothing but pity for this tom and these kits. "I don't know what happened," she hissed out. "I wasn't there when she died. But I can tell you this. I don't love you, therefore I am never going to be jealous of Reedshine or her beautiful kits."

Appledusk narrowed his eyes as she continued. "The day I found out about you and Reedshine, I was going to tell you that we're through. I had decided a long time ago I didn't want to break the warrior code further by being mates with a cat from a fish-brain Clan.

"I'm sorry about Reedshine, she seemed like a very kind cat. I wish I would have known her better."

Appledusk took a step back and began to walk away, but Mapleshade called after him. He turned around and she frowned. "You didn't deserve a cat like her."

Appledusk hung his head and padded away. "I know."

Mapleshade padded further into the darkness and eventually reached the hidden den entranced and pushed inside. She didn't see Redriver anywhere but knew he would be in the next room. She padded through the second wall of vines and found him sorting out some mixed-up herbs.

He looked up at her and nodded in greeting.

Mapleshade padded forward and laid beside him, pressing her cheek against his feather-soft fur. "I waited for you at the sycamore

tree yesterday. But you didn't come."

The tom's breath warmed her head as he nuzzled her. "I know," he purred. "But since the battle, ThunderClan and RiverClan must have doubled their patrols, even after dark. I can't get to you without being spotted."

She wiggled into his side and wrapped her white tail around him. He curled his tail with hers as he continued sorting the herbs.

"Meet me at Twolegplace from now on," he meowed. "Just until the patrols have calmed down."

"If only you didn't kill Reedshine," Mapleshade meowed quietly. "And if Appledusk didn't kill Birchface. Of all the cat's in ThunderClan, it had to be Oakstar's son!"

She felt Redriver stiffen. "I don't regret my kills," he growled. "I thought she was going to hurt you. I wouldn't allow it."

Mapleshade closed her eyes. "Still, you didn't have to kill her so... gruesomely. Now, RiverClan is directing their hate on me since I was the last cat to fight Reedshine."

"Then they are fools," Redriver meowed, rolling his eyes. "How can a tiny cat-like you rip apart a tall cat-like Reedshine? Honestly, Sunningrocks has always made RiverClan and ThunderClan a bit mouse-brained."

Mapleshade playfully nudged him. "Speak for yourself. I see where you get your vicious nature from," she meowed, referring to ShadowClan's sadism and RiverClan's fierceness.

Redriver flicked his tail and finished sorting his herbs into separate piles. His ear twitched suddenly and he looked at Mapleshade. "The Clans are leaving now. Are you spending the night?"

"I shouldn't," Mapleshade replied. "Ravenwing has been watching me like a hawk since the battle. He is a strong believer of me being a killer."

Redriver nodded and the tortoiseshell she-cat padded out of the den

and ran to catch up to her Clanmates.

chapter 5: only for a minute

ITS BEEN FOUR moons since the Gathering and Mapleshade had never been more close the cat who had brutally murdered Reedshine, Bloomheart and those three rogues.

Stemwing had been going on about hunting Redriver down and killing him once and for all, but Oakstar spoke against it, saying that they'll only attack if the tom is on their territory. Mapleshade knew that Stemwing would forever hate Redriver for killing his close friend, and she knew that Appledusk would stop at nothing to kill Redriver if he found out the truth.

Mapleshade had been meeting Redriver at Twolegplace every night. She had grown strong feelings for the loner and had told him three moons ago, and he accepted to be her mate.

She knew that she was being hypocritical. She ended it with Appledusk because she didn't want to betray her Clan, but something about Redriver was intoxicating and he seemed so charismatic. Mapleshade couldn't help herself.

But now things were different, and she had to see him right away.

She had raced across her territory and found Redriver at the edge of WindClan territory, a rabbit in his jaws. That's another thing she loved about him, he can slip through a cats paws like a snake. She doubted any of the Clans would catch him in their territory stealing their prey. Must be his ShadowClan blood.

Redriver turned his head and met her gaze. He quickly padded toward her and placed the rabbit down in front of her. "What are you doing here? It's dangerous to be this close to the WindClan border."

"I had to see you," Mapleshade meowed, shifting her paws. "There's

something you need to know."

The loner flicked his ear, waiting patiently for her to continue. Mapleshade took a deep breath. "I'm expecting your kits."

There was a flash of orange as Redriver's eyes went wide. "Are you sure?"

Mapleshade nodded. The killer tom curled his tail over his back. "I'm going to be a father," he purred. "But these kits will have three Clans in their blood. ThunderClan, RiverClan and ShadowClan. How will your Clanmates feel about that?"

"They won't know," she answered. She noticed Redriver flinch. "At least not at first," she went on. "I will raise them as ThunderClan until they have been fully accepted. Then every cat will be able to cope with the truth. Why should it matter that their father doesn't live in a Clan?"

The fur on her mate's shoulder's twitched. "You have great faith in your Clanmates," he muttered.

"No, I have faith in StarClan, and in the warrior code."

"You think StarClan approves of what we're doing?" Redriver narrowed his orange eyes.

"I think our warrior ancestors know that ThunderClan needs kits and we are providing them. How can our innocent kits not have their blessing? They will grow up to be fine warriors, loyal to ThunderClan." Mapleshade turned away before Redriver could say anything else. "I must return to my Clanmates before they come looking for me. Perhaps it's best if we don't see each other again until our kits have come." She looked back at him, he was picking up the rabbit again.

"I will be thinking of you," he replied and she licked his cheek before padding away into the woods.

The next day, Mapleshade was nudged awake by Nettlepaw. "Mapleshade, wake up! Beetail wants you to go on a dawn patrol. You're late!"

"All right, Nettlepaw. I'm coming." Mapleshade heaved herself to her paws. Last night, she felt the kits stirring inside her for the first time. *Is it because your father knows about you now?*

She craned her head to lick the rumpled fur on her flank, then pushed her way out of the den. She felt strangely heavy, unbalanced by her swollen belly.

The air in the clearing was still and cold, tasting of old leaves and damp earth. The little apprentice bounced around Mapleshade. "Hurry up! When did you get so slow?"

Mapleshade flicked him slightly with her tail. "What would Deerdapple do if you spoke to her like that, hmmm?"

Nettlepaw looked down at the ground at the mention of his mentor. "She'd probably make me pick ticks off Rabbitfur for a moon," he admitted.

Mapleshade purred, too full of joy about her kits to be short-tempered. "You're lucky I won't punish you, then. Now, off you go and let me speak to Beetail."

The apprentice scampered off with a squeak. Mapleshade headed over to the ThunderClan deputy, who was standing beside the entrance to Oakstar's den. The dark brown tabby nodded as she approached.

"I'd like you to join the dawn patrol, please," he meowed. "Frecklewish is leading it."

"Actually, there's something I need to tell you," Mapleshade began. Her paws tingled. "I won't be able to carry out my usual duties for a while. I'm expecting kits."

"Oh. Right. I... er... wasn't expecting that. Well, you must only do what you feel up to. Does Oakstar know?"

"Not yet. Why don't I help out in the camp today?" Mapleshade suggested. "I could fetch some soaked moss from the elders. If you like."

"That would be great," mewed Beetail. "And, er, congratulations."

"Thank you," purred Mapleshade. "It's wonderful news, isn't it?"

"Indeed," Beetail meowed. "And these kits... their father...?"

"I will be raising them alone," Mapleshade answered firmly. The deputy looked startled for a moment, then dipped his head. "May StarClan light your path, and the path of your kits."

Still rumbling with delight, Mapleshade turned and headed back across the clearing. Since she wasn't needed on the dawn patrol, she could go back to her nest until the rest of the Clan stirred. She knew she had to save her strength for when the kits arrived.

She was dozing in the dappled sunlight when she was roused by paws thrumming outside the den. Frecklewish burst in, her speckled golden fur fluffed up and her eyes sparkling. "Beetail told me your news!" she purred. "I'm so happy for you!"

Mapleshade sat up and curled her thick, white, tail over her paws. "Thank you." *You see, Redriver? My Clanmates will only be delighted to have new kits in the camp!*

Frecklewish stood beside Mapleshade's nest looking uncharacteristically shy. "Beetail also said that you would be raising these kits alone," she mewed.

Mapleshade tensed. She had not anticipated questions about her kits' father so soon.

Frecklewish looked down at the floor of the den. "Is... is that because their father is dead?" She lifted her gaze, and Mapleshade almost winced at the blaze of hope in her eyes. "Are these Birchface's kits?" Frecklewish whispered. "Is my brother going to live on through you?"

The air in the warriors' den was suddenly so thick that Mapleshade couldn't catch her breath. *Is StarClan offering me a way for my kits to be accepted by their Clanmates? I can't lie, not if I want them to know the truth later.* She stared at Frecklewish, unable to speak.

The golden she-cat didn't seem to need a response from Mapleshade. She nodded slowly, and the light in her eyes burned even more brightly. "I'm right, aren't I? Oh, thank StarClan! And thank you, Mapleshade. You will never know how much this means to me. I... I thought I would never be happy again after Birchface was killed in that terrible battle. But now I can help you to raise his kits, teach them that their father was a true ThunderClan hero, watch them take his place in the Clan..." She broke off and stepped gently into the nest until she crouched beside Mapleshade. She stretched out her front paw until it rested on Mapleshade's ginger-and-white flank. "I hope Birchface can see us," she murmured.

Mapleshade took a deep breath. *I have not lied out loud. This was all Frecklewish's doing. But I cannot turn down this chance to have my kits welcomed with the love they deserve. Redriver will understand that I have to put ThunderClan first, for now at least.* She unfurled her tail until it was resting on Frecklewish's shoulder.

"You have answered my prayers, Frecklewish," she mewed softly. "My kits and I are no longer alone."

Frecklewish's dark amber eyes shone back at her. "Never," she vowed. "These kits will be the best thing ever to happen in our Clan."

chapter 6: beauty

***OH, STARCLAN MAKE** it stop!* Mapleshade writhed in agony and sank her claws into the dried moss.

"Relax," Ravenwing instructed, placing a paw on her rippling flank. She so desperately wished it was Redriver helping her through the birth instead, he knew so much about medicine from his mother, Violetshine, and his aunt, Silverwhisker.

A spasm wracked her body, making her clench her jaw and resist the urge to sink her teeth into Ravenwing's thick-furred black leg.

"It's another tom!" gasped Frecklewish. "Oh, he's magnificent!"

Mapleshade had already given birth to a fiery ginger tabby tom and a reddish-brown tom.

Ravenwing turned to look. Mapleshade sprawled in the nest with her eyes closed, trying to not think about the pain yet to come. Something wet and squirming was shoved against her muzzle. She opened her mouth to protest – and smelled the sweetest scent that she'd had ever known. She lifted her head and blinked down at the dark brown bundle if slick fur beside her. *Oh, Redriver, you have three sons so far. And they're beautiful!*

"Lick him, Mapleshade," Ravenwing mewed. "It will help him to breathe."

For a moment, Mapleshade wanted to tell the other cats to get out, to leave her alone with this tiny precious creature. Nothing will be as special as these heartbeats when she met her first kits. Then her body buckled with another wave of pain and she cried out. Ravenwing pulled the kit away. "You take him, Frecklewish," he ordered.

"Gladly," came the she-cats mew. "Come here, little one. Let's get you clean and dry."

Mapleshade tried to say that she could take care of her own kits but the spasm grew stronger and suddenly there was another two kits lying beside her, their mouths wide open in a soundless mew, one of them their fur patched with ginger and white like his mother's, and the other a sand-coloured tabby.

"A tom and she-cat," Ravenwing announced. "You're doing great, Mapleshade." He ran his paws along her belly. "One more, and that's it. Come on now, stay focused."

An irresistible longing to be alone with her kits gave Mapleshade a fresh surge of strength and the final kit slithered out at once.

"A she-cat!" purred Ravenwing. "Smaller than her brothers and sisters, but in excellent shape. Your turn to take over, Mapleshade." He nudged all six kits into the curve of Mapleshade's belly. She propped herself up and twisted around to gaze at them in astonishment. *I did it, Redriver! Four sons and two daughters!*

"They are gorgeous," Frecklewish whispered, her voice husky with emotion.

Ravenwing nodded. "You did a great job, Mapleshade. We'll leave you alone to rest, but I'll come back with some herbs for you after sun high. Do you feel okay?" There was a flash of concern in his dark blue eyes, and Mapleshade felt a surge of sympathy toward the young medicine cat. He had been in sole charge of ThunderClan for just two moons since the death of Oatspeckle, and this was one of the first deliveries he'd had to supervise.

"I couldn't be better," she told him. Her throat felt dry and sore. "Could I just have some water, please?"

"I'll fetch it!" Frecklewish hopped out of the nursery.

Ravenwing watched her leave. "You made her feel life is worth living again," he commented. "She took the loss of her brother hard."

Mapleshade buried her muzzle in the soft, damp fur of her kits. "These kits are my gift to the whole of ThunderClan," she murmured. "I will thank StarClan for them every day for the rest of my life."

The medicine cat touched her lightly with the tip of his tail. "And ThunderClan thanks you," he meowed before leaving.

Mapleshade stared down at her kits. A ginger tabby tom, a dark brown tom, a ginger-and-white tom, a dark ginger tom, a pale brown she-cat and a sand-coloured tabby she-cat. All beautiful kits with great futures.

Mapleshade will make sure of that.

chapter 7: all of you

"WATCH THIS, LARCHKIT!" Wrinkling her muzzle in concentration, Petalkit (the pale brown she-cat) gripped the bundle of dry moss in her jaws and shook it violently.

Larchkit (the dark brown tom) grabbed the moss from her and tossed it across the clearing. Both kits scrambled after it, but before Petalkit could reclaim the moss, Bloodkit (the dark ginger tom) leapt on top of it. "Mine!" he declared.

"Don't you want to join in?" Mapleshade asked Patchkit (the ginger-and-white tom), who was lying in the curve of her belly. His fur matched hers so perfectly that it was impossible to tell where one stopped and the other began. "It looks like they're having fun."

Her son shook his head. "I'm fine here," he mewed. He snuggled in a little closer. "You need me to keep you warm, don't you?" His orange eyes – so much like Redriver's – blinked anxiously at her.

Mapleshade stifled a purr of laughter. She could barely feel his tiny body against hers. It was a rare cloud-free day in the rain-washed leaf-fall, and the sunbeams were just strong enough to bring cats out of their dens to bask, though there was a chill in the ground that warned of leaf-bare just around the corner.

"You're doing a great job," she told Patchkit. "I might have to share you with the elders to stop them from getting cold."

Patchkit's eyes grew wide with alarm. "No! I want to say with you forever and ever, even when I become an apprentice!"

Mapleshade nuzzled his head. "That won't be for another four moons, little one. By then you'll be so big and strong, you'll be glad to leave the nursery and start your warrior training."

"No, I won't," muttered Patchkit, burying his face in her chest fur. "I never want to leave you."

Petalkit, Larchkit, Bloodkit, Firekit (the fiery ginger tabby tom) and Sandkit (the sand-coloured tabby she-cat) were standing around the moss.

"You've ripped it to pieces!" Larchkit protested. "It doesn't roll away now, look." He prodded the pile of dusty brown shreds with his paw.

Bloodkit shrugged, rolling his amber eyes. "It was trying to escape and I caught it."

One of the elders, a grey tabby named Rabbitfur, padded stiffly over to the kits. "Looks like he killed it," he observed. "Want to play a different game?"

"Yes, please!"

Rabbitfur used his front paw to roll a small stone into the middle of the clearing. Then he nudged a twig with his nose until it lay a bit less than a fox-length from the stone. Mapleshade propped herself up to watch.

"I want you to stand by this stick," Rabbitfur meowed, pointing with his tail, "and pounce on that stone without touching the ground between."

Sandkit blinked. "But that's almost on the other side of the clearing!"

"I'd have to grow wings to jump that far!" mewed Firekit.

"Don't be mouse-brained," snorted Rabbitfur. "Your father could leap twice that distance and land on the smallest leaf without disturbing a fly."

Mapleshade felt a stir of alarm in her belly. Beside her, Patchkit sat up and tipped his head to one side. "Rabbitfur's really bossy!" he squeaked.

Petalkit was crouching down beside the twin, wiggling her rump as she braced herself for the jump. With a grunt, she heaved herself forward, but her hind paw caught on the stick. She lurched sideways, snapping the twin, and sprawled on the ground at Rabbitfur's paws.

"Humph!" he muttered. "Try again."

This time Petalkit managed to clear the stick but she barely made half of the distance to the stone. Rabbitfur shook his head. "You try, Larchkit," he rumbled.

The little brown tom looked very determined as he hunkered down. He sprang into the air, almost as high as Rabbitfur's ears, but came down almost vertically, like an acorn falling from a tree.

Rabbitfur had to dodge out the way to avoid being squashed. "Watch out!" He gave his chest a couple of licks. "Birchface managed to pounce without flattening any cats," he grunted.

Mapleshade couldn't listen to any more. She jumped out, dislodging Patchkit, who rolled over with a squawk and trotted into the clearing. "Perhaps they take after me, Rabbitfur," she meowed. "I can't pounce either."

The old tom narrowed his eyes. "You're not that bad," he rasped. "I can't believe any kit of Birchface would be heavy-footed as a badger." He glanced at Petalkit, who was licking the paw that got caught on the stick.

The blood was roaring in Mapleshade's ears now. "I will not have any of my kits judged before they have even begun their training!" she hissed. "Patchkit, come here! We're going for a walk through the forest."

Patchkit scampered over, but Petalkit and Sandkit were both pouting. "But we want to stay here and practice jumping," Sandkit mewed. "I want to be as good as Birchface."

Rabbitfur looked pleased. "You should be very proud of who your father was," he purred. "I remember the time we were stalking a

pheasant over by Twolegplace. I'd never seen a bird that big, but Birchface was fearless – and so quiet, I couldn't hear him over the breeze in the leaves!"

"I think the kits need to stretch their legs outside the camp," Mapleshade meowed, interrupting Rabbitfur's memories. "Come on, you three! No arguments, Petalkit, Sandkit."

Patchkit's eyes – so like Redriver's, they made her heart flip over – were huge. "Are we allowed outside? I thought we had to stay in the camp until we are old enough to be apprentices."

"I'll be with you, so you'll be perfectly safe," Mapleshade told him. Oakstar and Beetail were out on patrol and Frecklewish had gone to check the barrier of stones at Snakerocks. Rabbitfur had wandered back to his sunny spot outside the elders' den. Apart from some dozing cats, the clearing was empty. No one would take much notice if she took the kits out.

Suddenly, Mapleshade couldn't bear to be in the ravine another moment. With a whisk of her tail, she trotted toward the tunnel through the gorse. The kits bundled after her, chirping with excitement.

"I'm going to catch a badger!" Larchkit boasted.

"I'm going to watch the badger eat you first!" Bloodkit retorted.

Sandkit rolled her eyes. "Don't forget it'll eat you, too!"

"And you!" Firekit added.

Patchkit was running at Mapleshade's heels. "Don't let a badger eat me!" he whimpered.

Mapleshade paused beside the tunnel entrance and turned to lick Patchkit's ears. "I'll never let anything bad happen to you," she promised. With one more glance to check they weren't being scrutinized, she ushered her kits into the branches.

"Ow, it's prickly!" squeaked Petalkit.

"Don't stop," Mapleshade urged. With a rapid beat of paws on the hard earth, the kits burst out of the tunnel and stopped dead, staring around.

"Wow, outside of the camp is really big!" breathed Firekit.

"It's even bigger at the top of the ravine," Mapleshade meowed. She nudged her kits toward the path that led up to the trees. Her fur prickled at the thought of being seen by a patrol.

The kits scrambled up the slope; Petalkit in the lead. They looked even tinier among the tree trunks, the towering oaks, and the beeches that overhung the ravine. Mapleshade hurried them along a little-used path beneath dense ferns, the kits wanted to stop and sniff every leaf, every mark on the ground, but Mapleshade kept them moving, ducking beneath the sweet-smelling fronds and hoping the fern scent would cover their tracks.

The undergrowth began to thin out, and the sound of splashing water drifted through the trees. Larchkit pricked his ears. "What's that?" he asked. As he tried to peer through the stalks, he stumbled over a fallen twig and landed on his nose. Mapleshade whisked him back to his paws before he could wail. *I'm glad Rabbitfur didn't see that*, she thought. She couldn't deny that these kits were clumsier than their ThunderClan kin.

She thought it was strange since Redriver was so graceful and swift, she can't recall a time she ever saw him stumble or make a mistake with his movements.

Patchkit, Firekit and Sandkit kept going while Mapleshade picked up their brother, and Mapleshade heard his sudden squeak of surprise.

"Water! Water everywhere, look!"

His littermates bundled forward to stand beside him at the edge of the bracken. Mapleshade joined them and looked out at the dazzling brightness of the river as it flowed past, swift and sparkling.

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," Petalkit whispered.

"Where did it come from?" Larchkit asked.

Mapleshade thought for a moment. "I don't really know," she admitted. "Further upstream is a deep gorge beside WindClan's territory –"

"Can we go there?" Sandkit demanded.

Mapleshade shook her head. "No, little one. It's too far for you to walk today. But one day you'll see it. I promise."

Patchkit, unusually so timid and happy to let his littermates try everything first, tottered over the stones to the edge of the water.

"Be careful!" Mapleshade warned.

Her son turned to look at her, his eyes shining and droplets of water glinting on his whiskers. "It's okay," he mewed. "Watch!"

Before Mapleshade could stop him, he launched himself forward and slipped into the water. For one heart-stopping moment, he vanished, then his ginger-and-white face bobbed up on the surface. "Look at me!" he squealed.

Larchkit, Bloodkit and Petalkit raced down the shore and plunged in. Firekit and Sandkit both hesitated before following suit. For a few strides, their little paws dug into the pebbles while the water lapped at their fluffy bellies, then they were swimming through the rolling water.

Mapleshade felt a burst of love like the sun coming out. *Oh, Redriver! Our kits are part RiverClan, for sure!*

Firekit reached a branch sticking out of the water and hauled himself onto it. Water streamed from his fire-like pelt, leaving it as glossy as a crow's feathers. He looked no bigger than a mouse with his fur flattened to his sides, and his flanks heaved as he caught his breath. Mapleshade felt a jolt of concerned for her eldest kit.

"Are you okay?" she called.

Firekit nodded, still panting too hard to speak. Mapleshade paced up and down the shore. She hated the idea of getting her paws wet, but she wasn't sure if Firekit had enough strength to swim back on his own. The other kits were playing hide-and-seek in a clump of reeds close by the shore.

"Bloodkit, Petalkit, go help your brother!" she meowed.

Suddenly the rushes on the far shore rustled and a familiar tiger-furred head appeared. Mapleshade froze at the sight of her mate on RiverClan's territory. Redriver looked at Firekit with furrowed brows before wading into the water, his red, black and white fur turning a bit darker as he slid beneath the surface.

"Larchkit, Petalkit, Sandkit, Bloodkit and Patchkit! Come here!" Mapleshade hissed. The kits waded toward her, looking scared.

"Is that huge rogue going to catch us?" Patchkit squeaked.

Mapleshade watched Redriver's head bob swiftly closer to the branch. "No," she mewed. "You're safe, don't worry."

Redriver mewed something to Firekit, too quietly for Mapleshade to hear. Firekit slid down the branch and into the water. The large loner steadied him with one large black paw, then began to propel him toward the ThunderClan shore. Mapleshade realised that the other kits were trembling from cold and she bent her head to lick their fur.

"Are we in trouble?" Larchkit mewed.

"Hush, everything is fine," Mapleshade murmured between licks.

Redriver waded out of the river with Firekit dangling from his jaws. He set the kit down on the stones and nudged him to his paws. "I think this one is worn out from all the swimming," he commented. His eyes burned into Mapleshade's. "You took a risk, bringing them out here in the big bad wild."

"I wanted to show them the river," Mapleshade meowed. She angled her body so that the kits were bundled behind her, out of earshot. She could hear Bloodkit asking Firekit what it had been like to

swim so far out.

Redriver leaned forward until his muzzle was almost touching Mapleshade's cheek. She could smell fresh blood on him and noticed blood streaming down his chest fur.

"It's not mine, I assure you," he meowed, his eyes darkening. "The cat this blood belonged to his long gone."

But before Mapleshade could ask who it belonged to, Redriver spoke again. "They're wonderful," he meowed. "Strong and brave, and as confident as any RiverClan cat in the water. I am so proud of you." He straightened and shook out the water from his fur. "It's best if you leave now, I suspect a RiverClan patrol would be on their way."

Mapleshade nodded, "Of course. Thank you for bringing Firekit back."

Redriver turned to leave through ThunderClan territory but Mapleshade called him back. "Who did you kill?"
Redriver paused and turned around again, "A cat that deserved what was coming."

Mapleshade nodded, fear tingling in her heart. Before he left, he spoke again. "Those kits are not old enough to be out of the nursery. What were you thinking bringing them outside at the age of two moons?"

Despite the scolding, Mapleshade's heart soared when Redriver remembered how old they were. She simply chuckled and he purred before disappearing in the shadows.

Mapleshade herded the kits into the bracken. They were bouncing on their paws – even Patchkit, whose fur was fluffing up like a thistledown as it dried.

"That was the best thing ever!" Larchkit squeaked.

"When can we come again?" Sandkit asked. "Swimming is way more fun than jumping."

"I swam the furthest, didn't I?" Firekit mewed proudly.

Suddenly, a dark shape blocked the path. Mapleshade looked up and met Ravenwing's searching blue gaze. The medicine cat glanced down at the kits. "What are they doing in the river?" he asked.

Mapleshade's paws started to tingle. "Did... did you see them?"

Ravenwing nodded. "I saw everything. What's going on, Mapleshade?"

"A loner had to save Firekit –" mewed Larchkit.

"He did not! I was just resting," Firekit interrupted crossly.

"It's fine, no one was in danger," Mapleshade meowed as Ravenwing narrowed his eyes.

"That loner was really nice!" Firekit squeaked. "He said I was very brave and a really good swimmer!"

"Did he?" mewed Ravenwing. "What else did he say?" He took a step closer.

Mapleshade curled her tail around her kits. "Come on, little ones, time to go home."

Ravenwing didn't move out of her way. "I've seen an omen, Mapleshade," he murmured. "I wonder if you know anything about it?"

There was something in his voice that made Mapleshade's fur prick. "Why would I know anything about an omen? I'm not a medicine cat."

Ravenwing stared at her without blinking. "A tiny stream appeared in my den, in a place where no stream had run before. It carried with it six pieces of water reed, and then soon after, six frogs hopped through it." He swept a paw over the ground as if he was tracing the path of the rivulet. "Water reed doesn't grow in ThunderClan territory, they grow in RiverClan, and frogs don't wander here either, they roam ShadowClan," he went on. "They

don't belong inside our boundaries. Do you understand?"

Mapleshade shrugged. "There's been so much rain this leaf-fall, bits and pieces and frogs must be washing all over the place." She tried to keep her voice light but there was a cold, heavy feeling in her belly as if she swallowed a stone from the river.

Ravenwing watched the kits play with an acorn, shuffling it from one to the other with their paws. "I think this omen means that the river and shadows have washed six strange cats into ThunderClan – six cats that don't belong here."

Mapleshade's heart was pounding so hard, she could hardly breathe. "What are you trying to say?" she whispered.

Ravenwing gazed at her, and suddenly he didn't seem like a young, inexperienced cat anymore. Knowledge glittered in his eyes like frosty stars. "Birchface is not the father of these kits, is he? Rabbitfur told me what happened today, how they showed no signs of being able to stalk or pounce like him. And don't tell me that they take after you instead," he added, cutting Mapleshade off as she opened her mouth. "You tread as lightly as any ThunderClan warrior."

He looked past her, at the river splashing beyond the shade of trees. "I watched your kits swim in that river as if they were fish. I think these were fathered by a RiverClan cat. I suspected Appledusk, the way you looked at him at Gatherings moons ago, but things have changed now. Not to mention none of your kits look like him. But now I suppose it's that tiger-furred tom, judging by his unusual eye-colour and the way he spoke to you when he brought Firekit back."

Mapleshade felt the ground sway beneath her paws. "ThunderClan is blessed to have six beautiful, strong kits," she hissed. "The truth will be revealed at the right time. It's not my fault that everyone assumed Birchface was their father."

"I cannot let you lie to our Clanmates!" Ravenwing spat. "And now that I know the truth, I cannot lie, either."

"I have told you nothing," Mapleshade mewed through clenched

jaws.

"You have told me plenty," Ravenwing responded, and there was sadness in his sky-coloured eyes. "The truth must come out."

"Please don't say anything!" Mapleshade begged. "These are ThunderClan kits!"

"Yes, but they are also part RiverClan and ShadowClan!" Ravenwing corrected, his voice hard as ice. "I know about the story of Ripplestar and Kinktail. I know that tom is their kin. I figured it out when I saw those eyes. Our Clanmates deserve to know, I'm sorry, Mapleshade. Sorry for you, but even sorrier for these kits. They will end up suffering for the lies you have told." He whirled around and vanished into the bracken.

Mapleshade stared after him. *StarClan, help me!*

For a moment, she considered taking her kits and running to Fourtrees, hiding her kits away in the secret den where her dangerous mate could protect them. But then she looked at Petalkit balancing the acorn on her head while her siblings tried to knock her off her paws and dislodge it.

ThunderClan loves theses kits, she thought. *And I won't do anything to hurt them. I always planned to tell them all the truth. It just happening sooner than I thought.*

chapter 8: attention

"COME HERE, MAPLESHADE," Oakstar commanded.

On legs that seemed to be made of stone, Mapleshade walked forward until she was standing in the centre of the clearing. "What is it, Oakstar?"

The dark brown tom twitched the tip of his tail. "Who is the father of your kits?" he asked. "Tell the truth!"

Before Mapleshade could speak, there was a flurry of golden spotted fur beside her. Frecklewish pushed past a cluster of warriors and joined Mapleshade below Highrock. "We know it's Birchface!" she called up to her father. "Why are you asking this?"

"I want Mapleshade to tell us herself," Oakstar mewed, his voice soft with menace. "She let me believe that my son, Birchface, was their father. I cannot imagine that one of my warriors would dare to tell such a lie."

Mapleshade shifted her weight onto her hind paws so that she could hold the leader's gaze. "Any Clan would be proud to have these kits grow up to serve them," she declared.

"Even if they knew they were half-clan? Or is it quarter-clan?" Ravenwing meowed. "We deserve to know the truth, Mapleshade. The cat that murdered Bloomheart is their father, isn't he?"

For a moment, the whole forest seemed to hold its breath. Then there was a screech of pure horror and Frecklewish launched herself at Mapleshade. "Is this true?" she yowled, clawing at Mapleshade's face. "What have you done?"

Mapleshade stumbled backward. "Stop!" she gasped. She tried to raise her forepaws to shield herself but Frecklewish had pinned her

down.

Suddenly, the weight was lifted from Mapleshade's belly and she opened her eyes to see the she-cat being hauled away by Beetail and Seedpelt. Mapleshade staggered to her paws. Blood pooled in her eye from a torn eyelid, and her cheek stung from a well-aimed blow. All around her, the cats hissed and muttered.

Frecklewish shook of the warriors and glared at Mapleshade. "You have betrayed my brother's name!" she spat. "You have betrayed us all with your lies and your disloyalty. You don't deserve to be called a warrior and nor to those... those quarter-clan monsters!" She curled her lip toward the six kits, who cowered beneath the ferns. "Their father killed Bloomheart, and I know he killed that RiverClan cat, Reedshine, too! He killed three of those rogues! He's a murderer! Get them out of here!"

Mapleshade shook scarlet droplets onto the grass. "Why does it matter who their father is?" she demanded furiously. "I have given ThunderClan three fine kits. I am a queen and I should be treated with respect. StarClan knows we need more warriors, and here they are!"

Have my Clanmates gone mad, that they would turn against me like this?

Oakstar bounded down from Highrock and stood in front of her. His yellow eyes gleamed with hatred and he thrust his head forward until his breath blew hotly on Mapleshade's muzzle. "Have you forgotten my best-friend and your mentor? Of all cats, it had to the one who killed your Clanmate! You can't possibly expect my forgiveness." He stepped back and raised his head. "You have betrayed the warrior code and lied to your Clanmates. We will not raise these kits within the walls of our camp, nor the boundaries of our territory. Take them and leave. You are no longer a warrior of ThunderClan."

Mapleshade stumbled backward. "You can't mean that! These kits belong to ThunderClan! You have to let us stay!"

Oakstar shook his head. "No. I do not." He gazed around at the Clan.

"Ravenwing told me about an omen he received. A mysterious stream of water that washed away six pieces of reed and how six frogs stumbled into his den. Reeds and frogs don't belong in our territory, and certainly not in the heart of our camp. These kits will bring nothing but danger!"

"Get rid of them!" screeched Frecklewish. "Drive them out!"

"Oakstar's right, they don't belong here," growled Seedpelt. "Bloomheart was your mentor! And you chose to be mates with a cat who killed him? I am ashamed of you!"

"You know I would never betray my Clan, Seedpelt!"

"You already have," he gruffly replied and Mapleshade felt her heart, break into pieces.

"I will never forget this," she hissed, slowly turning to glare at each one of her former Clanmates. "You have betrayed me and my kits. You will live to regret this day forever, ThunderClan, and that is a promise." She stalked over to her kits and swept her tail around them. "This is no longer our home," she told them. "Come."

chapter 9: turning page

"**WHY DON'T THEY** like us anymore?" asked Patchkit as they made their way toward Fourtrees. They had just past the sycamore tree.

"Because they're mouse-brained, bat-blind, and fox-hearted," Mapleshade hissed.

"Those are bad words!" Sandkit mewed. "You're not supposed to say them."

"It's the truth," Mapleshade answered grimly.

"What were they saying about our father?" Petalkit asked. "Don't they like Birchface either?"

Mapleshade felt an overwhelming urge to lie down and slip into the darkness of sleep. "I'll tell you everything later," she promised. "First we must go to Fourtrees."

"Why are we going there?" asked Firekit. "We're not supposed to go there until we're apprenticed!"

"Everything is different now," Mapleshade murmured.

When they emerged from the shelter of trees, the rain was pelting so hard that Mapleshade could hardly keep her eyes open.

"I don't want to go to Fourtrees anymore," Larchkit moaned. "I want to go home."

"I wish we were in the nursery," Bloodkit sniffed. "It's too wet to be outside."

"We have no home but in Fourtrees!" Mapleshade snapped. She had to raise her voice over the pounding raindrops. "Forget about ThunderClan and the nursery." She stared at the towering oak trees

in the distance. "There's a comfortable, warm den when we get there."

"But how do you know?" Patchkit asked.

"Because I and your father live there. He will be pleased to see us."

"I thought our father was dead!" cried Bloodkit, tipping his head to one side.

Mapleshade took a deep breath. "Remember that nice loner who helped Firekit today? He is your father. Not Birchface."

Larchkit wrinkled his nose. "But that doesn't make sense. Our father can't be a loner. We're ThunderClan cats!"

"You're part RiverClan, ShadowClan and ThunderClan," Mapleshade told him. "That's why you liked the water so much today."

The six kits' eyes stretched wider until they were like moons. "Is that why your Clanmates are mad at us?" asked Petalkit.

"Yes," mewed Mapleshade. She felt the hackles rise along her spine. "But they are wrong," she growled. "They'll change their minds soon and until then, we'll live in Fourtrees. Everything will be okay." She beckoned them to walk faster and they began to run toward the tall four oaks.

When they reached Fourtrees, they began to climb down the sandy slope into the sheltered clearing. In the shadows, Mapleshade spotted her mate, grooming his soaked pelt.

There was a flash of orange and she saw Redriver immediately get on his paws and race toward them as if he were a WindClan cat. He eyed her and their kits.

"What's happened?"

Mapleshade shivered and pressed against his warmth. Their kits curled around their legs. "They found out," she choked. "They kicked us out of the Clan."

Redriver's eyes held fury in them and he nodded. "Let's get out of the rain," he said over the noise of hailing. "The kits and you need to get warm. I have some fresh prey inside."

She nudged her kits forward and all seven began to follow the large tom inside the hidden den. It was much warmer inside and looked so tempting to just lay down and sleep. Redriver went into the second room with a mouthful of wool and moss. Mapleshade began to lick her kits of the rainwater that streamed down their fur.

"I'm sleepy," Firekit muttered as his mother vigorously licked his fur the wrong way.

A moment later, Redriver reappeared and began to groom Bloodkit as Mapleshade moved on to Petalkit. Mapleshade eyed her mate as he licked Bloodkit. His fur was streaming with rainwater and she could see his thick muscles under it all. She felt herself blush and looked down at her precious kit.

Once they finished grooming the rain from their kits' fur, Redriver stood and used his tail to push the vines out of the way of the second room. Mapleshade peered inside to see a nest of wool and moss and feathers made inside. There was a ball of moss for the kits and some other playthings.

"I made it for the kits'," he meowed. "I used to sleep in one like that while my mother and aunt slept in here."

The kits, despite their exhaustion, looked at each other excitedly. They stumbled inside the second and began to climb into their new nest to sleep.

Redriver moved his tail and the vines blocked her view from her precious bundles.

Her mate set his fiery gaze onto her and she gulped. They held nothing but anger and a murderous glint. Thinking it was directed at her, she crouched and closed her eyes, preparing for a clawing.

But there was nothing.

She felt nothing but a comforting lick on her ears. Mapleshade

opened her eyes to see her mate curling around her in the nest, his tail wrapping protectively around her as he groomed her ears and face.

Mapleshade felt herself begin to purr as her mate was being affectionate with her. Soon enough, they fell asleep in the nest, warm and curled around each other, listening to the calming rain outside.

chapter 10: feverish

THE NEXT MORNING, Redriver noticed his mate trembling with fever as his kits played in their hollowed-out area. He placed a paw on Mapleshade's forehead and narrowed his orange gaze. His mate was so fragile.

Red River padded over to the herbs and dug out some catmint, resisting the urge to bury his muzzle into the green grass. He took some over to Mapleshade and settled it down in front of her nose. Red River nudged her awake and she drowsily lapped up the herbs. Soon enough, her wheezing stopped and her fever went down a little, but it was still active.

Suddenly, Bloodkit tumbled out with a shocked meow. He looked up as his father with blinking orange eyes.

"Hello," Red River purred. "You alright?"

"Yep!" Bloodkit squeaked, jumping to his small paws. He raced back inside where his brothers and sisters were playing with a moss-ball.

Mapleshade stirred awake and blinked at her mate slowly. Red River crouched beside her and pressed his nose behind her ear. "You went to sleep so quickly last night. How are you feeling?" He peered at her and Mapleshade nodded. "I'm okay..."
"You still look exhausted," Red River observed. "Eat some fresh-kill from the pile, then I'll let you get some rest."

Mapleshade shakily got on her paws and reached for a mouse. "Can you give the kits some prey?" she asked through chews. Her mate nodded and grabbed a small rabbit before padding into the other section of the den where their kits were playing.

Firekit turned his head and meowed happily. "Food!" he mewed and ran up to his father. Red River placed the rabbit down and all six

kits immediately dug in.

As they ate, Red River thought of his mate, their kits and how the Clans have betrayed both their family. Rage swirled inside his heart, and he forced his fur to lay flat and his claws to stay sheathed.

Biting out the words, he spoke. "I must go out now but look after your mother while I'm gone. Don't get into trouble and unless your mother says so, stay inside."

The kits all nodded and continued eating. Redriver padded out of the section and past Mapleshade who was asleep again. He emerged out of the hidden den and into the sunny morning light. He raced out of Fourtrees and plunged into the wispy undergrowth that edged RiverClan's territory. He stayed well clear of the border as he headed uphill, toward the gorge. He knew there was a wooden Twoleg bridge just below the sheer walls of rock where he would be able to cross into ThunderClan territory.

Redriver reached the wooden bridge and raced across with swift strides, ears flattened and fur spiked. The noise of the river tumbling below dragged his mind back to the first time he met his kits. He jumped off the bridge onto dry, sandy ground that led into RiverClan territory. He took a few steps toward the ThunderClan border and tasted the markers on the still air.

Then he froze. He realized this was Ravenwing's fault. He had remembered walking away and seeing the small black cat speaking to his mate. He didn't hear what he was saying, but he must have been confronting her about the kits' birth. Redriver bit back a growl. This was all his fault. He had jumped to conclusions, shattered the Clan's trust in his mate, forced her Clanmates to judge her for something beyond her control. Because of his actions, Redriver's kits could have died in the rain.

Rage swelled once again inside him until sounds of the forest faded away and his vision blurred. He suddenly stumbled along the edge of the border, not caring when his claws scraped on stones or brambles dragged at his pelt. His skin throbbed with heat and he was dimly aware of being thirstier than he had ever been in his life.

He stopped by the stream and felt refreshed when he drank some water.

He eventually couldn't walk any further and flopped down where he was, in a narrow ditch beside a holly bush.

Suddenly, there was a rustle and the familiar face of Mapleshade peeked through. "Mapleshade?" he asked, sitting up. "What are you doing here? Where are our kits?"

"They're with my mother," Mapleshade meowed. "Her name is Acornleaf. She was an elder of ThunderClan, but she decided to leave when they kicked I and our kits out."

Redriver nodded and then his ears pricked when he heard another rustle. Mapleshade's amber eyes widened. "I can scent Nettlepaw," she whispered. "Hide!"

Redriver crept into a thick, tall undergrowth behind his mate and a small ginger tom emerged from across him and his mate.

"Mapleshade!" squeaked Nettlepaw. "You're not supposed to be here!"

"Then pretend that I'm dead," Mapleshade growled. "I'm a spirit coming to haunt you."

Redriver nearly purred in amusement.

Nettlepaw's gaze darted around the ditch warily. "Where are the kits?" he whispered. "And your m-mate?"

Redriver felt a surge of satisfaction at the apprentice's fear of him. Mapleshade shook her head. "They're with my mother, right now."

"Acornleaf!" Nettlepaw's eyes grew huge. Mapleshade nodded and flicked her tail. "Leave me alone."

With a muffled meow, Nettlepaw turned and fled. Redriver was about to re-emerge but stopped when there was another patter of paw steps above them. Nettlepaw was pushing a bundle of herbs down toward her.

"I was collecting these for Ravenwing," he mewed. "But I think you need them more. You don't smell good, Mapleshade." He peered earnestly at her. "Please eat them. I... I'm sorry about you and your mother. Frecklewish insisted that Acornleaf should leave, too, since you were her daughter."

Mapleshade's fur bristled and she hissed. "Frecklewish *suggested* it?"

The apprentice looked scared. It made Redriver proud. "Y-yes. She said that the blood of Mapleshade doesn't belong in ThunderClan. I don't believe that, though, don't worry."

Mapleshade snarled with anger and a cat's voice was heard from the other side of the holly bush. "Nettlepaw! Where are you?"

Nettlepaw let out a whimper and raced away. Mapleshade chewed the leaves as Redriver crawled out of his hiding place. As he groomed her ears, she spoke angrily.

"How could Ravenwing still be gathering herbs, treating his Clanmates, as if nothing happened? How could Frecklewish do this to my mother?"

Redriver narrowed his eyes. "What are you going to do about it?"

Mapleshade stared into her mate's eyes and gave a sly look. "Ravenwing would be alone on his journey, unprotected by warriors who were stupid enough to listen to his accusations and doom-mongering."

"Mothermouth," Redriver meowed. "And what will you do there?"

Mapleshade unsheathed her claws and dug them into the earth. "I will kill him! I will tear out his throat and make him feel the pain he caused me and our kits!"

Her mate purred, feeling proud of the little monster he had created within her. Redriver beckoned her to stand and follow him out of the ditch and toward the border, into the bramble thickets that encircled the hollow at Fourtrees. It wasn't safe to stay so close to ThunderClan, not when patrols might be looking out for Mapleshade, Acornleaf and Redriver. They didn't know if Nettlepaw

would keep quiet about finding Mapleshade, though presumably, he wouldn't admit to giving her herbs.

The two mates dropped down the steep into the hollow. Mapleshade paused briefly to look up at the four gigantic oaks. Redriver saw an unfamiliar ginger-and-white she-cat with a greying muzzle up ahead with wise green eyes that Larchkit and Sandkit obviously inherited from her. This must be Acornleaf.

She was sitting nearby the hidden den in the shadows as the kits played with a shiny stone and some feathers in the sunny clearing.

Mapleshade was about to go toward WindClan territory, obviously to go to Mothermouth, but Redriver stopped her. "Stay here with the kits. I don't think Acornleaf can look after them forever."

"But—"

"No." He meowed sternly. "You can kill, but not now. Let me take care of Ravenwing."

Mapleshade hesitated, glancing at him and then her kits before nodding. "Okay. Be safe, my love." She touched noses with him raced toward her kits and mother. Acornleaf glanced at Redriver warily before waving her tail at him. He waved his back politely before scrambling up the other side of the hollow and plunging into WindClan territory.

There was a strong scent of a fox, which made his pelt prickle for his kits, but it was stale rather than fresh, and would hide his own scent from curious border patrols.

He felt rather than heard the thrumming of terrified paws over the ground; peeping out of the bracken, he saw a rabbit hurtling across the moor toward her, pursued by a patrol of WindClan cats. Redriver hardly had time to think before the rabbit ran straight into him in a tumble of paws and fur. He bit down hard on its neck and it went limp. The warriors were still racing toward him so Redriver grasped the rabbit in his jaws and hauled it up the nearest tree. His claws tore on the smooth bark and the rabbit dragged at his teeth but at last, he reached the lowest branch and crawled onto it with

his fresh kill. He heard the WindClan cats scramble to a halt below.

"Where did the rabbit go?" asked one of them.

Another was circling the trunk, sniffing the ground. "The trail ends here, but that's impossible. Rabbits don't climb trees."

"I don't know how you can smell anything," grumbled an old tom with patchy brown fur. Redriver overheard his name once. Midgepelt. "It stinks of fox around here."

Redriver held his breath, waiting for one of the cats to look up and see him. There was little leaf cover this far down the trunk, and he couldn't climb any higher without making a noise. But the patrol sniffed around for a moment more, then headed back to the open moor, grumbling about vanishing prey. *Fools,* Redriver thought as he bit into the rabbit.

After eating it, he headed straight for the open, knowing there wouldn't be any more patrols.

He had travelled to the moonstone many times to speak with his mother, father and aunt. He thought he'd hate the open moor but had adapted quickly.

At last, he reached the foot of the slope and crouched beside the Thunderpath. It was sun high by now, and the sun burned against his pelt as the stench of monsters caught in his throat, but there were few noisy beasts around at this time. He only had to wait a few moments before silence fell heavily in the valley and he was able to dart across the hard-black stone. On the other side, he plunged through the long soft grass and into a hedge. He recalled passing a Twoleg den with cows and a dark, hay-scented barn where he had paused to hunt. He decided to stay well clear this time, in case he ran into any of the other medicine cats travelling early to the Moonstone.

After crossing a broad expanse of grass and pushing through another hedge, Redriver saw the dark brown tops of some Twoleg dens that looked like the barn. He swerved to the far side of the next stretch of grass and trotted through a row of trees to where the

ground started to slope steeply up. Tilting back his head, he stared at the jagged rocks that marked the top of the ridge. The sun was striking them, turning them rosy and warm-looking, but their outlines still looked like teeth against the pale sky.

Redriver's belly rumbled again, and he wondered how he could be hungry when he just ate. He did then now realize it was quite skinny for a rabbit. If he didn't eat now, he would be hungry for the rest of the day up the hillside. He ducked back under the trees and quickly picked up the scent of a mole snuffling in the sunshine. Not his favourite by far, but too easy to miss. He struck the flattened black body with his front paw and tucked in for a meal. Afterwards, he felt stronger, clearer-headed.

He bounded up the side of the ridge, scattering loose pebbles under his paws. As the weak sun, set the jagged stones ablaze, Redriver leapt onto a boulder and opened his jays to roar at the valley below.

I'm ready for you, Ravenwing! You'll pay for what you have done!

The lonely life Redriver had known was now over; he would now dedicate every beat of his heart to avenging his mate, her mother and his kits.

chapter 11: a raven

THE SUN DRAGGED slowly across the sky. Redriver's belly was still full from the mole; besides, he was too tense to eat. His claws were blunt after his long day of walking, so he sharpened them on a stone. A hawk swooped overhead and Redriver imagined it feasting on Ravenwing's body after he finished with him. He would bleed a river of blood, every drop spilled for his mate and kits...

At last, the sky faded and the shadows between the rocks grew thicker. Redriver fluffed up his fur against the chill and crouched on top of a boulder, watching for any sign of movement at the foot of the hill. Suddenly, a darker shadow flitted across the grass. Ravenwing finally had arrived. Alone and early.

Redriver unsheathed his claws and let them scratch against the stone. It's been a while since he had killed a cat. He stayed very still, hardly breathing, as Ravenwing climbed the slope toward him. Redriver tensed his hindquarters, ready to leap down onto the medicine cat, but then he paused. If he attacked him out here, he might be seen by the other medicine cats. And where was the satisfaction in a simple ambush? He should follow Ravenwing down to the Moonstone and tackle him there, at the source of his precious omens.

Redriver pictured the long, stifling tunnel from his many visits. His pelt prickled at the thought of entering that darkness again but then scared wails of his kits and the heat of Mapleshade's previous fever reminded him and he slid soundlessly off the boulder just a heartbeat before Ravenwing padded past. Redriver could hear him panting heavily after the climb. Redriver waited until he vanished into the gaping maw of Mothermouth before slipping out and trotting after him.

The hole swallowed Redriver up at once, thick black shadows pressing around him until there was no glimpse of moonlight when

he looked back at the entrance. Redriver padded over the stone floor, trying to keep his steps as light as possible. But Ravenwing must have heard something because he stopped, invisible in the dark ahead of him, and called out.

"Who's there?"
Redriver froze, convinced that his heart was thudding loud enough for the medicine cat to hear. But after a moment Ravenwing carried on, his pawsteps the softest whisper in the silence. Faint grey light appeared ahead, silhouetting the medicine cat's ears. *The Moonstone!* Redriver realized he had dropped into a hunting crouch and was stalking forward one step at a time, his tail flattened behind him. He reached for the opening to the cave and finally gained sight of the Moonstone glittering in the silvery light.

Ravenwing knelt in front of it, his head bowed.

With a hiss, Redriver sprang forward, his long claws extended.

He landed on the small tom, pinning him onto the cold stone. His blue eyes were bright in the moonlight.

"You!" Ravenwing choked. "You killed Bloomheart! What are you doing here?"

Redriver let his claws sink into the fur around Ravenwing's throat. "Taking revenge for my mate and my kits," he snarled. "If I could kill you three times over, I would." He knew he had nothing to say to the medicine cat. All he knew was that he needed to die. He simply did not deserve to live happily within a Clan when his kits couldn't. Like he couldn't. He bit down on Ravenwing's neck and blood gushed out all over Redriver's muzzle and chest-fur. The small black cat choked on red liquid before going limp. A pool of red forming around his throat.

There was a sound of pawsteps approaching down the tunnel. Redriver let Ravenwing fall to the floor and slipped behind the crystal.

"Great StarClan!" he heard the WindClan medicine cat, Larkwing, hiss. "Ravenwing! What happened?"

There was a grunt from his companion – peeking around the edge of the Moonstone, Redriver saw Sloefur, the ShadowClan medicine cat, sniff at Ravenwing's unmoving body. "He's dead," Sloefur announced in horror. He looked around and Redriver ducked behind the crystal.

"We can't leave him here," meowed Larkwing." Come on, help me get him back to the surface."

Redriver listened to the sound of them dragging Ravenwing up the tunnel. He waited until the rays of the moon had slid past the hole in the roof and the cave was plunged into darkness. Redriver's heart pounded, but he reminded himself that he shouldn't be afraid. The only dangerous things in the shadows were him. He wondered in the medicine cats would continue with their gathering, but they didn't come back into the cave. Redriver figured that they had returned to their Clans to deliver the terrible news.

When the tiny patch of sky above the hole turned white with the dawn, Redriver stretched his cold, stiff legs and padded back up the tunnel. Outside Mothermouth stood a heap of small stones that had not been there before. A tuft of black fur poked through a gap in the pile. Redriver sniffed and recognised Ravenwing's scent. Rather than carry him all the way back to the forest, his fellow medicine cats had decided to bury him here, marking his final nest with a careful mountain of rocks.

Redriver curled his lip. He didn't deserve such a memorial.

He struck down at the pile of rocks, knocking them to the ground. His claws caught on the rocks and his pads stung but he kept flailing until the heap was destroyed and Ravenwing's body was exposed to the grey dawn. Redriver looked up and caught sight of a hawk circling overhead. *Here's your next piece of fresh kill,* he thought in satisfaction.

The hawk swooped down, and Redriver bounded away from the scattered stones. He bounded down the hillside without looking back.

He reached a hedge at the edge of a stretch of thick soft grass and

crawled under the branches. Suddenly, he was too tired to walk another step. Ignoring the rumbling in his belly, he closed his eyes.

In his dreams, he saw blurs of three more cats. One was a large brown tom with amber eyes, a golden speckled she-cat with the same coloured eyes and lastly, he recognised Appledusk, the pale brown tom with green eyes from RiverClan. Redriver's ears picked up the sound of his kits wailing and Mapleshade's terrified expression as she curled up beside her mother, Acornleaf.

Redriver shook himself and sat up. Ravenwing had died – did that mean that both Redriver and Mapleshade didn't get their revenge? Of course, not, there are many cats still alive to blame.

An image drifted into his mind of the golden speckled she-cat sitting amongst the ferns at the Gatherings. *Frecklewish!* According to that ThunderClan apprentice, she was the one who had urged her Clanmates to kick out Acornleaf, the helpless old elder.

Frecklewish needed to pay for what she did, just as Ravenwing had done. But this time, he'd do so with Mapleshade by his side.

Redriver stood up, shaking on exhausted paws. This would be harder to achieve because Frecklewish only left ThunderClan to go to Gatherings when she would be surrounded by her Clanmates. And even inside the border, she was rarely alone. Redriver needed to find a way to attack her within the territory, the safest place for a warrior to be. Thinking hard, he started to pad along the bottom of the hedge. A tendril of ivy caught at his foot and almost tripped him.

Hissing, Redriver snatched his paw away. The ivy lay on the ground, quivering like a glossy green snake.

He grinned maniacally. Snakerocks. He pictured the nest of adders that Mapleshade had said been blocked with stones. Perhaps there was something deadly inside ThunderClan borders after all!

chapter 12: once upon a wish

REDRIVER TREKKED BACK to the forest, skirting the edge of WindClan under cover of darkness and heading for Fourtrees. He bounded down the sandy slope where Mapleshade was waiting outside anxiously. Once she spotted him, she bounded forward to touch noses.

"You're back!" she meowed in relief. She looked down at the dried blood on his chest-fur and her eyes held both fear and pride. "You killed him!"

"I did," he purred. "Now it is time to kill again. Frecklewish is next for what she did to your mother. And I have the perfect plan."

Once he explained about luring Frecklewish to Snakerocks, Mapleshade blinked in surprise and excitement. "I'm coming with you?"

Redriver nodded and his mate leapt forward and cuddled into his side, licking his neck lovingly. He stood up and nudged her toward the den. They went inside and Mapleshade led him toward their nest.

"Acornleaf is asleep with the kits inside the other room," she meowed. "She likes you, by the way. She doesn't like how you kill other cats, but she won't object out loud."

Redriver shrugged and curled around Mapleshade, licking her ears as they fell asleep.

The next morning, Mapleshade told Acornleaf to take care of the kits while they left Fourtrees for the day. Acornleaf, knowing full well what they were going to do, only nodded and turned to take care of the six kits who were eating their breakfast.

Redriver and Mapleshade bounded up the slope and walked around the ThunderClan border where Twolegplace was. They both knew they'd have to wait for Frecklewish to pass by on patrol; even then, Mapleshade would need the lick of StarClan to get the she-cat alone. She followed her mate into the lush green grass at the foot of the Twoleg fences, then scrambled up and over the wooden barrier, dropping down into the small, strongly scented enclosure on the other side.

Almost at once, a fat grey-and-white tom heaved himself through a tiny flap in the side of the Twoleg den and lumbered toward them, mewling.

"Get out of here! You're one of those stinking forest cats, aren't you? My household doesn't want you in their backyard! Shoo!"

Redriver stepped in front of his mate and then shot one paw out to rake the kittypet's face. The kittypet leapt backward, screeching. Blood dripping from his left eye. "My eye! You blinded me!" he wailed.

Mapleshade hissed at the kittypet, who turned and skidded back into his den. When the flap banged shut behind his plump hunches, Mapleshade studied the enclosure. A tree grew beside the fence with broad enough branches to support her, and dense leaves to hide her from view. They would wait there for Frecklewish. Redriver followed her up the tree and settled on a bough that looked out over the forest. Mapleshade had caught a squirrel at Fourtrees and drunk from a stream, so her belly was comfortably full. Resting her chin on her paws, she let herself doze beside her mate, one ear pricked for any sounds below.

At dusk, four ThunderClan warriors came past, creeping along the bottom of the fence as if they feared kittypets were about to attack. Redriver curled his lip in scorn. He thought Mapleshade's Clanmates would be brave like her. As night fell, Mapleshade dropped down from her branch into the long grass, her mate following closely behind her.

ThunderClan scent surrounded them both and for a moment, Mapleshade felt a pang of longing; then she pictured her Clanmates

driving her and her kits away, and she thought of Frecklewish exiling Acornleaf, and her fury returned. She quickly caught a blackbird for herself while Redriver came back with a fish from the river nearby. They brought them back to the tree and began to eat. Behind them, the grey-and-white tom was bundled out of the den by a cross-sounding Twoleg. Mapleshade watched the kittypet squat in the grass, its eyes huge with fear, then race back inside.

Redriver purred in amusement and stretched his legs before closing his eyes to sleep.

When they woke with the first glimmer of dawn, they felt pangs of hunger. The blackbird had been old and scrawny, and the fish was small compared to Redriver's side. Redriver relaxed, flicking his tail while Mapleshade scanned the forest for signs of prey.

Mapleshade jumped into the ferns and after a moment of silence, she re-emerged out toward Redriver but then froze. "I can hear them!" she hissed.

Redriver jumped to his black paws and raced past Mapleshade and into the ferns. Mapleshade followed him and pricked her ears. She heard Seedpelt was among them, directing his patrol to split up and hunt before meeting again at the lightning-struck elm. There wasn't time to get back to the Twoleg fence, so Mapleshade crouched beneath the bracken with her mate and fresh kill. Pawsteps came closer, then a glimpse of golden dappled fur through the green stems.

Frecklewish!

StarClan had brought her right to Mapleshade. But she couldn't attack her here, not when the others were so close by.

Redriver felt Mapleshade back carefully out of the bracken, dragging the mouse. Redriver realised she must be making a scent for Frecklewish to pick up, so he ducked out of the bracken and followed his mate.

Sure enough, he heard the golden speckled she-cat sniffing the air and uttering a low growl that suggested she had picked up the trail.

Redriver hid in some ferns around Snakerocks as Mapleshade trailed the mouse.

Mapleshade eventually emerged from the treeline and she swerved, still carrying the mouse. She padded around the base of the rocks and emerged into the clearing on the other side. There was hardly any trace of cat scent; clearly the warriors were concerned that the adders might escape from their prison.

Mapleshade left the mouse on the ground and raced to a heap of smaller stones that had been piled in front of the adders' nest. She pushed aside as many as she could, leaving a gaping black hole, then ducked behind a boulder. She glanced at Redriver, who narrowed his eyes, nodding. Confidence swelled inside her chest.

Frecklewish emerged cautiously from the bushes, her jaws parted to scent the air and her fur bristling. She looked puzzled at the dead mouse. Mapleshade then sprang out from behind the rock and snarled at her.

"You exiled my mother!"

Frecklewish stumbled backward in shock. "Mapleshade! You shouldn't be here!" She arched her back. "Leave or I'll call the rest of the patrol."

Mapleshade lashed her white tail. Redriver saw a tiny flicker of movement from the pile of stones. Was that a snake slithering into the light? Mapleshade took a step closer to the rocks. "Too scared to fight me yourself, Frecklewish?" she hissed. "You prefer watching helpless elders be kicked out of their home, don't you?"

The golden speckled she-cat stiffened. "I thought your mother would go to you," she rasped. "I never meant for her to die."

Mapleshade chuckled. "She isn't dead. But I don't believe what you say! You're a fox-hearted coward. If she was dead, I'd bet you'd be glad."

Frecklewish bounded toward Mapleshade, her amber eyes flashing with anger. "I wish you were dead!" she spat. "You betrayed my

brother's name!"

Mapleshade dodged sideways just as Frecklewish lunged at her. With a yelp, the she-cat stumbled into the pile of stones. Before she could find her footing, there was a hiss and a sleek dark green head darted forward, tongue flickering.

"Adder!" gasped Frecklewish. There was a blur of movement, then Frecklewish staggered backward, screeching. "It bit me! Help!"

"Like you helped my mother?" Mapleshade growled. "Never! I hope you die in agony!"

Redriver emerged from the ferns as Frecklewish yowled again, a wordless shriek of pain. Redriver nuzzled his mate as he glared down at Frecklewish. Almost at once pawsteps thrummed toward them through the trees.

"Frecklewish, is that you?" Seedpelt called.

Redriver nudged his mate into a clump of bracken and followed him inside. They knew they had to flee before the patrol arrived but they both wanted to watch Frecklewish die. With a crackling of undergrowth, Seedpelt and two other ThunderClan warriors, Thrushtalon and Deerdapple, burst into the clearing.

"Keep watch for snakes!" Seedpelt ordered. His Clanmates spun around and scanned the rocks. Seedpelt bent over Frecklewish, who was curled on the ground with her paws over her eyes. "It's alright Frecklewish, we're here now."

Seedpelt stared up at the sky, "Oh, StarClan, if ever we needed Ravenwing, it is now! Why did you take him from us?" Then he shook himself and faced his Clanmates. "Deerdapple, we need soaked moss, as fast as you can. We have to wash the venom out of her eyes. Thrushtalon, fetch every scrap of fennel you can find in the medicine stores. We have to try and save Frecklewish's eyesight."

The two warriors darted away. Seedpelt placed his paw on Frecklewish's flank. "Lie still," he meowed. "We're doing everything

we can."

"But we don't have a medicine cat!" Frecklewish whimpered. "Am I going to die?"

"Not on my watch," Seedpelt meowed.

Mapleshade felt bile rise in her throat for her former denmate as he soothed the she-cat. Frecklewish's eyes were a weeping, cloudy mess. Even if she survived, she would never see anything again. Redriver nudged her. "We have to go before all of ThunderClan come to help her," he growled.

Nodding, she followed him through the undergrowth to the thickest part of the forest, then raced back to the Twoleg fence. Cries of alarm filtered through the trees as more ThunderClan cats arrived at Snakerocks. The sounds faded as Mapleshade and Redriver climbed over the fence and crouched on the bare brown earth, both panting.

Mapleshade's eyes glowed with self-pride. "I did it!"

"Yes," Redriver meowed, though he didn't sound as happy as she did. "But you don't know for sure if you killed her. We only know that she could possibly be blind."

The ginger-and-white she-cat deflated a bit. "Oh. Right."

"Don't worry," the tiger-furred tom licked her ears. "You'll have your chance. For now, let's go back to our kits."

His mate nodded and they left for Fourtrees.

chapter 13: apple doesn't fall far

WHEN THEY RETURNED to Fourtrees, Redriver and Mapleshade were toppled over by their five-moon-old kits, who happily greeted them home. It was only now Mapleshade realised that they were getting big enough for training and knew she had to teach them everything she knew. Mapleshade was also certain Redriver would do the same.

Acornleaf trotted out of the den. Despite her old age, she was still energetic. Though, her eyes held great remorse, yet, understanding.

As the kits tumbled away, playfighting around the clearing, Acornleaf leaned toward them. "Is it done, then?" she asked.

Redriver nodded. "Yes. Frecklewish will most likely be dead by morning."

Acornleaf nodded and turned to watch the kits play.

Mapleshade felt warmth inside her heart. She remembered when she and her own littermates would play, and how Acornleaf would watch from the nursery. Sadly, Mapleshade's littermates, Hawkpaw and Creampaw, died of Greencough before they could even become warriors. In their honour, Oakstar named them Hawkclaw and Creamfrost, so they could join StarClan as warriors.

Mapleshade noticed Redriver padding out of the clearing and toward RiverClan territory. Acornleaf went back inside the den to rest and Mapleshade turned to watch her kits play. Even Patchkit was playing, batting the ball of moss around, avoiding his siblings.

She felt proud of her precious bundles.

The next morning, Mapleshade woke up to Redriver prodding her shoulder with his paw. "Get up, Mapleshade. It's time."

Mapleshade knew what he was talking about. She had to kill Appledusk. Redriver explained it was because the tom was getting too suspicious. Appledusk was convinced that Mapleshade had something to do with Reedshine's death and might want to avenge her. Redriver couldn't risk his mate's life.

So they had to kill Appledusk for their family's safety.

And Mapleshade had to be the one to do it.

Full of determination, Mapleshade stretched awake and gulped down a shrew from the pile.

Redriver peeked into the second part of the den and nodded his head when he saw Acornleaf curled around his kits as they all slept.

Acornleaf blinked open her eyes and looked at him questionably.

"I have a strong feeling," Redriver meowed. "I think you need to take the kits to the abandoned barn across WindClan territory. Can you do that?"

Acornleaf nodded. "What do I tell a WindClan patrol if I come across one?"

"That you're just passing through," he replied. "If they recognise you, just say you're passing through to go to Twolegplace."

Acornleaf nodded, gathered the kits and padded out of the clearing.

Redriver ducked out of the entry and looked at Mapleshade. "Let's go."

The ginger-and-white she-cat shivered and she didn't know whether it was excitement or uncertainty. They leaped out of the Gathering hollow and behind them, lightning flashed above the trees. They reached the river and picked their way upstream along the ban. There was a ridge of little stones stretching across the river down here – she had used them to cross and meet Appledusk on the other

side once when they were just beginning to see each other.

There was no way Mapleshade could swim across the river like her mate, but she could wade if she had to.

As Redriver merged into the water, not even shivering or flinching at its ice-cold touch, Mapleshade waded in, her paws pressing on the stones beneath the water. She shuddered at the freezing water. She forced her legs through the current, feeling the water tug against her and splash her flanks.

"Are you okay, Mapleshade?" Redriver asked from across the river. He was already on the other side. Mapleshade wasn't surprised. He had RiverClan blood in his veins.

"I'm fine," Mapleshade managed to say. The river was much slower and shallower than when she saw Redriver last swim. But she still hated every paw step, and she hissed in relief when she hauled herself onto the far bank. She lay there for a while, panting, as the water trickled from her fur.

Redriver nudged her with his paw. "We need to keep moving. You'll get warmer if your body moves."

"How?" Mapleshade asked, standing on her paws.

Redriver blinked. "Faster the blood flow, faster you'll get warm."

Both plunging into the reeds, stiff and springy so that they flicked her face and tripped her tired paws, Mapleshade pushed forward until Redriver stopped, detecting the RiverClan border marks. He beckoned her to follow him. He retraced his steps so that they were following the edge of the territory safely out of scent-range. Dense reeds gave way to softer undergrowth dotted with low, slender-branched willow trees. Mapleshade's belly rumbled but she didn't dare hunt in case it alerted the RiverClan cats. Sounds carried too easily on this side of the river.

Gradually the ground became firmer and drier beneath their paws, and the air filled with green, leafy scents rather than the taint of fish. Redriver and Mapleshade reached a dense stand of trees,

leafier and sturdier than the other willows. The territory border was just close enough that they could look down from the branches and watch for passing cats.

With a sigh, Mapleshade wondered if her kits were okay with Acornleaf. Even though her mother was a very energetic elder, she still had her limits.

Mapleshade fluffed up her fur against the cold and waited. She was rewarded quite soon by a cluster of paw steps crackling nearer: an early hunting patrol, chattering and crashing through the undergrowth as if they wanted to alert all the prey to their approach. Mapleshade curled her lip, thinking of ThunderClan's stealth. She looked at Redriver, but he had a calm expression on his face, and she never knew what he was thinking. He was unpredictable. He was ruthless.

The patrol passed right under them without noticing the two cats above them.

Before their noise faded, more cats approached. The breeze carried on a scent that made Mapleshade's nostrils flare.

A heartbeat later, the bracken parted to reveal a pale brown tom, broad-shouldered beneath his thick, glossy fur. He was half the size of Redriver, and looked like an apprentice compared to the murderous loner.

It was Appledusk.

Once again, StarClan brought Mapleshade's prey right to her paws.

But then the stalks rustled and a plump grey apprentice bundled out. He crouched down and leaped forward, stubby front legs outstretched. Appledusk shook his head. "You need more height than that, Perchpaw," he chided. "You must be prepared to fight full-grown warriors when you go into battle."

The young cat's blue eyes stretched wide. "I will get taller, won't I?"

Appledusk purred. "Of course you will, but you still need to learn how to jump."

"Why don't I spring at you to show you how it's done?" squeaked a small voice. An orange kit slipped into the clearing, she was smaller than Patchkit. Mapleshade's hacked bristled. *Can't Appledusk keep his kits in check?*

Appledusk went from amused to cold. His eyes dulled and he stared blankly at the kit. "What are you doing out of the nursery, Reedkit?"

Reedkit looked down, ashamed. "My littermates wouldn't play with me! I wanted to see you," she explained.

"Well, I don't want to see you," Appledusk growled. Behind him, Perchpaw looked uncomfortable. "I can take her back for you Appledusk?"

Appledusk nodded. "Thanks."

"But fath—"

"Don't call me that," Appledusk snapped as Perchpaw picked up Reedkit and padded away.

Mapleshade gripped the branch so tightly that two of her claws snapped off. She barely noticed the jolt of pain. How could Appledusk treat his own kit like that? How many mistakes must Appledusk make? She bunched her quarters beneath her, ready to jump down.

Appledusk looked around when he heard Mapleshade and Redriver leap of the branch and land in some tall reeds. His green eyes widened in horror when he saw Mapleshade emerge out of the reeds. "What are you doing in RiverClan territory?"

"Making sure my safety and the safety of my kits are in high hopes."

Appledusk bared his teeth. "What are you talking about? You killed Reedshine during the battle when no one was looking. Get out of here before I call a patrol."

Mapleshade felt Redriver emerge from the reeds and press himself against Mapleshade.

"We'll go," Mapleshade spat. "But you'll have to fight me first."

Appledusk took a step back. "Mapleshade, I don't want to fight you."
"I'm not giving you a choice!" Mapleshade hissed.

She bunched her hindquarters beneath her and lunged at him. Appledusk dodged away. "Just leave!" he gasped.

There was a crackle of stalks and Perchpaw appeared. "What's going on?" His gaze fell on Mapleshade and he bristled at the sight of Redriver. "What are they doing here?"

Mapleshade ignored Perchpaw and unsheathed her claws, aiming for Appledusk's neck. "I'm sorry it had to be this way," she meowed. Her claws struck home, piercing fur and flesh, and a spurt of blood leaped out at her. With a grunt, Appledusk dropped at her paws, blood pouring from his throat.

In the same moment, a heavy weight struck Mapleshade from behind. Perchpaw gripped her with his paws, but before he could bite her neck, Redriver pounced and slashed at his throat. The apprentices blood spurted and he died as quickly as Appledusk, choking on his blood in his mouth.

Mapleshade looked at both cats. "We killed them..."

She was shaken but she had no idea why, she wasn't afraid. Was she?

Redriver gave her a long look before guiding her toward the bushes behind the willow tree. Mapleshade could hear a patrol of cats arriving at the scene. Mapleshade's back ached as they walked through the undergrowth.

They crossed the river and made their way across WindClan territory. Mapleshade felt relief when she spotted the barn a few yards away. Once they entered the barn, Mapleshade slumped to the ground, feeling dirt and hay grind into her blood-soaked fur.

Redriver called for Acornleaf and she orange elder came over and examined her daughter with wide amber eyes.

"She's got some minor scratches and I think the muscles in her back were torn."

Acornleaf frowned. "She'll need medical attention."

"I will gather some herbs for inflammation, fever and small wounds."

There was a race of paws and Redriver left the barn. Mapleshade opened her eyes to see her kits huddled together, looking frightened.

"Mama..." Firekit whimpered as Mapleshade fell into unconsciousness.

chapter 14: our bloody love

***T*HEY TURNED AWAY** from the harsh wind and sped through the grass toward Fourtrees. As he raced toward the clearing in the middle of the four great oaks where he had seen those fox-hearts. Seedpelt wondered grimly why Oakstar let them live in the first place.

The sun was high in the sky, and the clearing was crisscrossed with shafts of cold sunlight. He dug his paws into the soft ground and pushed on ahead of Deerdapple and Thrushtalon, his chest tightening with fear as he tore along the trail that led to the secret den that Mapleshade and Redriver always snuck inside of. Without hesitating, he ducked his head and raced through the lichen and vines.

"Mapleshade!" he yowled as she exploded into the den.

It was completely empty. Silence. No cat stirred, and the scent of cats was stale.

Dawn came with bright light when Mapleshade woke up. Her back had a dull ache and it was kind of itchy. She slowly sat up and looked around. She was laying on a comfortable nest of moss, hay, feathers and sheep wool. It was very comfortable and she made a satisfied purr. But Mapleshade noticed that Redriver and her kits were not in the barn.

She spotted Acornleaf nearby, scanning the small fresh-kill pile of shrews and a couple rabbits. Finally, the elder picked a rabbit and was about to lay down somewhere when she spotted Mapleshade, sitting up and awake.

Acornleaf dropped the rabbit and padded over. "You're finally

awake!"

"How long have I been sleeping?" Mapleshade asked.

"A moon," Acornleaf croaked. "We thought you'd die. Turns out Perchpaw managed to dig his claws in some dangerous places that could have killed you. I'm so glad you're alive. I couldn't bare to lose another kit before I died."

Acornleaf's eyes dulled and Mapleshade knew she was thinking of Hawkclaw and Creamfrost. "I miss them, too," Mapleshade mewed and licked Acornleaf's cheek. "But we'll see them again in StarClan."

"I hope so."

Mapleshade looked around. "Where is Redriver and my kits?"

"Since you went into a coma, Redriver had been training the kits. He would be hunting with Patchpaw and Bloodpaw, now in WindClan territory."

Her kits had apprentice names. What else had she missed out on?

Acornleaf continued, pride shining in her eyes for her grandkits. "Larchpaw and Petalpaw are hunting in the river across from RiverClan. And Sandpaw and Firepaw are practicing battle moves outside the barn."

Knowing two of her precious kits were not too far, Mapleshade padded out of the barn, leaving Acornleaf alone to eat her breakfast. Mapleshade's eyes watered when she saw a sand-coloured tabby she-cat and a orange tabby tom practicing battle moves, claws sheathed.

As they battled, Firepaw saw his mother watching and excitement flashed in his eyes. "Mother--!"

Sandpaw, who didn't notice Mapleshade, landed on Firepaw with a war cry. "Oof!" Firepaw tasted dirt. "Get off me, Sandpaw!"
The she-cat looked up to see her mother and gasped. She leaped off of Firepaw and raced toward Mapleshade with a ecstatic squeal. She looked like she was about to barrel into her mother but thought

about it mid-run and skidded to a halt before her. "You're awake!"

"I am," Mapleshade purred and nuzzled her daughter's head. "You've grown so big!"

Sandpaw purred happily and Firepaw came over to them.

"But I am even bigger!" Firepaw meowed proudly. "I am gonna be as tall as father one day!"

"I'm sure," Mapleshade agreed.

Firepaw looked as if he was still growing, even though he was larger than his littermates. Mapleshade yawned and looked at them, pride filling her heart. "Why don't you show me some training moves?"

"Okay!"

The two young cats went back to the sandy patch they were practicing in and began to train. Mapleshade watched them for ages and gave them some tips as they fought.

The sun was high in the sky, now. Sandpaw and Firepaw were both tired and ready to go eat. Mapleshade dismissed them from training and her eyes brightened when she saw Larchpaw and Petalpaw making their way over with a bunch of fish in their jaws. A very large cod was hanging over Larchpaw's shoulders.

Larchpaw was bigger now, his green eyes brighter and his dark-brown fur glossy and thick. Petalpaw was a pale brown beauty with tabby paws and amber eyes like Mapleshade's. Mapleshade knew that the toms would be very attracted to such a pretty cat.

When they saw their mother awake and healthy, they padded as fast as they could without dropping the fish.

They greeted her with happy mews and love.

Larchpaw then began telling how they caught such a big fish. He told Mapleshade and the others in the barn how he and Petalpaw went further down river and found a calm pond with so many big

fish inside. How RiverClan hadn't discovered it, they didn't know.

Finally, as the sun was setting, three cats emerged into the barn. Mapleshade recognised the scents immediately. Redriver had a rabbit in his jaws, beside him, Bloodpaw and Patchpaw were holding a bunch of magpies and rabbits. Redriver saw Mapleshade once he put down his prey and raced toward her. He nuzzled her lovingly and both Patchpaw and Bloodpaw looked eager to give their mother some nuzzles, too.

Redriver laid down beside her and Patchpaw passed his mother a rabbit. Realising how hungry she was, Mapleshade chowed down on the prey happily.

"So," she said between mouthfuls. "What's happened while I was asleep."

Redriver sighed. "Oakstar and Darkstar have partnered up and are hunting us down. They want vengeance for Bloomheart, Reedshine, Ravenwing, Frecklewish, Perchpaw and Appledusk." He then turned to Larchpaw and Petalpaw. "Have you seen any RiverClan cats today?"

"No," Larchpaw answered. "We decided to go downstream so they wouldn't accidentally spot us. That's how we got such a big catch!" he added, proudly.

Redriver nodded in approval and didn't bother asking Sandpaw or Firepaw due to them training all day outside the barn. He looked troubled.

Once they all ate up, they went to their nests to sleep.

Mapleshade and Redriver curled up together in her nest and he wrapped his tail around her smaller form. He dug his nose into her neck fur and breathed in her scent.

Mapleshade pressed her head to his cheek and wrapped her thicker tail around him. She felt comforted and loved, she missed sleeping by his side. Mapleshade loved her family.

The next morning, Mapleshade woke up to find Redriver gone.

She sat up and stretched, cleaning moss and feathers out of her fur. Nearby, her kits and mother were asleep in their own nests each.

Where was he?

That's when paws thumped in a panic pace into the barn. It was Bloodpaw, his orange eyes wide in horror. "Help!"
Everyone woke up abruptly and Mapleshade raced over to Bloodpaw. "What's happened?"

"It's father!" Bloodpaw gasped. "He wanted me to follow him to Fourtrees, and when we got there he told me to wait at the top. When I waited, I saw more cats come into the clearing and they attacked him!"

Mapleshade felt everything go cold. "Is he okay?"

"I don't know!" Bloodpaw wailed. "I raced back here before I could see."

Mapleshade told them to wait there with Acornleaf while she ran as fast as her paws could take her to Fourtrees. Panic clawed itself into her chest and her breathing was ragged. When she saw the four tall oaks ahead, she became more desperate. There were challenging yowls heard and she couldn't bare knowing what could have happened to Redriver.

When she reached the edge of Fourtrees, she looked down and gasped.

Around the clearing, dead cats littered the grass. Redriver was in the middle, panting and soaked in blood. Many more RiverClan and ThunderClan cats surrounded him. Mapleshade could see Seedpelt amongst them, looking determined.

On the Great Rock, Oakstar and Darkstar looked down with rage of their fallen Clanmates, their fur bristling.

Redriver didn't go on without injuries, though. He had a deep gash on the top of his head, his paws were bleeding, his claws torn or broken. His mouth was covered in the blood of other cats. A long gash across his shoulders and bite marks in his flank.

Leaping down from the rock, Oakstar approached Redriver with dark, amber eyes. He raised his clawed paw to strike Redriver, but Mapleshade leaped down into the hollow and barrelled into the leader of ThunderClan. With a screech, she slashed her claws over and over again on his face. Blood spraying. Oakstar struggled to get away.

Seedpelt went to attack but Redriver lunged and pushed the ThunderClan tom away.

"Leave us alone!" Mapleshade hissed.

"Like you left Reedshine, Appledusk and all the other cats alone?" Darkstar snarled. "Never! We will win, we will avenge our Clanmates and defeat you!"

With a mighty yowl, Darkstar leaped off the rock and slammed into Mapleshade. Darkstar was about to slash the tortoiseshell's throat but Redriver moved as quick as WindClan and Mapleshade didn't see. It was too fast.

All she saw was Redriver on the ground, blood pouring from a deep wound in his throat.

"No!" Mapleshade yowled in anguish as she watched her mate choke on his own blood. She leaned down beside him and nudged his head. He was silent and still, like when he was sleeping. But his flank wasn't peacefully rising and falling like it did every night.

Mapleshade tried to rouse him but when she nudged his head up, it fell back to the ground with a small thump.

The fur on Mapleshade's neck stood on end and she stood up straight. She looked around at the bloodshed around her. Seedpelt was unconscious nearby, Oakstar was definitely dead, those blows must have taken his last two lives. His face was unrecognisable. And many more cats were either dead or dying.

There were many living cats left, too many for her to count. They were all bristling and hissing, their eyes wild with vengeance and hostility. Mapleshade glanced at the body of her mate, who

protected her and their family until his last breath, and she whimpered. She thought of the handsome, tall tom who she met all those moons ago and felt tears prickle her amber eyes.

Mapleshade turned back to Darkstar. "You killed him!"

Darkstar licked her blood-soaked paw. "Good. With him dead, the Clans can live in peace."

"The Clans will never live in peace," Mapleshade snarled. "I will haunt you until the Clans are no more, mark my words. My vengeance will last forever."

Mapleshade sprung forward, her claws unsheathed and slammed into the dark leader of RiverClan. The black she-cat yowled in shock as Mapleshade dug her claws into her throat. But the weight of a RiverClan warrior pulling her away was too much for Mapleshade.

Mapleshade was flung across the clearing and she stumbled to her paws. She glared at the Clan cats and thought of her kits. She can't die now. Not with her kits scared and waiting for her. Their father was dead and they needed at least one of their parents.

Mapleshade stared at them with hate in her eyes. They watched her as she grasped Redriver's body in her mouth, pulling him up the slope by his neck. Mapleshade was unsure if they would follow but was thankful when they didn't move a muscle.

What seemed the whole night, Mapleshade sobbed as she dragged her mates body through the moors of WindClan territory all the way to the barn.

She couldn't describe the reactions her kits made when they saw the dead body of their father. They wailed and dug their faced into his fur. All of them including Acornleaf sat vigil for the rest of the night, it seemed, before the sun rose and both Mapleshade and Acornleaf buried Redriver on a small hill next to the river.

When they returned to the barn, Mapleshade noticed two cats there. One was a large grey tom with blue eyes and darker dapples, the other was a bluish-grey she-cat with blue eyes. They were speaking

with the kits. And they both had collars around their necks.

Bristling, Mapleshade hissed. "Who are you?!"

The two cats looked at the she-cat and elder.

"I'm Stormsky and this is Blueheart," the tom said.

Mapleshade froze. *Redriver's littermates!*

"We heard of our brother's death," Blueheart sobbed, her eyes showed pure remorse. "We never got to say goodbye. He was so angry when we decided to be kittypets."

"We wanted to come over today to apologise and become a family again, but..." Stormsky trailed off.

Mapleshade's fur flattened.

Blueheart looked up. "How did he die?"

There was a silence for a while and Acornleaf led the apprentices inside the barn, much to their protests.

"RiverClan and ThunderClan slaughtered him in Fourtrees," Mapleshade meowed, her throat feeling tight.

The two didn't ask why, it seemed they already knew.

Mapleshade invited them into the barn and knew it would be good to have Redriver's siblings living with them. Mapleshade didn't trust them but she had to make risks sometimes.

Mapleshade glared at the forest in the distance.

I'll get my vengeance, just you wait!

epilogue

SEASONS HAD PASSED and a beautiful tiger-furred she-cat sorted the herbs in the medicine cave in the Pride's camp. Beside her, a white tom with black paws was sorting more. He looked up with big blue eyes. The tiger-furred she-cat then placed the mint back into it's section in the wall. "And that's what happened to my ancestors."

Bluepaw looked at her with wide eyes. "That's horrible."

"It is quite the horror-love story, isn't it?" Redclaw asked. "Many cats here have been told what Redriver looked like, and they say I look exactly like he did."

"That's sort of scary," Bluepaw admitted.

Redclaw let out an amused purr. "I'm a medicine cat," she mewed. "I am not expected to fight and kill ruthlessly as Redriver. I don't even want to."

"But you killed Deadflower."

Deadflower had been discovered in killing her sister, Goldspeckle, in the forest and abandoning her kits in the woods many moons ago. Redclaw found out during a fire and had pushed Deadflower in it.

"That's because she threatened to kill more cats," Redclaw meowed. "I couldn't let that stand. Redriver killed for sport. But he also killed to protect his family, like I did."

Bluepaw went silent, accepting her explanation.

"When you had your vision last night," he meowed thoughtfully. "Did you see Redriver or Mapleshade in StarClan?"

Redclaw froze. "No. No, they belong in the Dark Forest. Despite doing what was best for their family, they didn't belong in the stars."

From outside in the hollow camp, Stormstar stood on the High Rock. He looked like an exact replica of Stormsky. His mate, Goldwing, looked exactly like his mate, Cerci.

"It's strange," Bluepaw commented. "How come we've never seen any Clan cats?"

"Our Pride left the Clan territories a long time ago when they decided it was time to move beyond threats. We retreated into the mountains and found our precious hollow," Redclaw replied. "From then on, we only had peace despite traitor cats and dangerous predators. Other than that there are no thunderpaths, no monsters, Twolegs, kittypets or anything of the sort."

"It sounds safe," Bluepaw meowed. He then gathered up some alder bark. "I'm gonna go give these to Ratscar, she's complaining about tooth aches, again."

"Don't pay mind to her rude behaviour!"
"I know!"

Redclaw looked around at the camp.

The true descendants of Mapleshade and Redriver. Of ShadowClan, ThunderClan and RiverClan.